



IDEAS IN CONTEXT

The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir

Ambiguity, Conversion, Resistance



Penelope Deutscher

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THE PHILOSOPHY OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

Many studies of Simone de Beauvoir have concentrated on her literature, her life, and her famous 1949 work *The Second Sex*. *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir* places Beauvoir's theory of women's "otherness" in the context of a number of contemporary theories of ambiguity. Professor Deutscher reconsiders the resources on which Beauvoir drew and the innovation involved in their transformation to her purposes.

The focus given to Beauvoir's philosophy on gender and thus to her earliest work has overlooked the transformations she effected to her own concepts of ambiguity, reciprocity, and ethics as she considered different modes of otherness. Gender was just one of a number of these, and this book counterbalances its grip on our memory of her work, by situating gender in the context of ageing, generational difference, embodied time, and race. By differentiating these aspects of otherness, Beauvoir revisited some of the concepts of reciprocity and ethics for which she is best remembered.

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The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir
Ambiguity, Conversion, Resistance

IDEAS IN CONTEXT

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Ambiguity, Conversion, Resistance

PENELOPE DEUTSCHER

Northwestern University



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521885201

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First published in print format 2008

ISBN-13 978-0-511-42342-0 eBook (EBL)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-88520-1 hardback

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Acknowledgments

With very warm thanks to colleagues who shared their responses to earlier versions of this material: in Australia, the Departments of Philosophy at the Universities of Sydney and Tasmania; the Art and Affect Workshop, Macquarie University; and the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies, University of Sydney; in the United States, the Departments of Philosophy at Colby College; Miami University (Linda Singer Memorial Lecture Series); the New School University; University of Notre Dame; Pennsylvania State University; University of Richmond; State University of New York, Purchase; Vanderbilt University, the Center for the Humanities; Grinnell College; the central division of the American Philosophical Association (invited speaker session, 2002); in Britain, the Departments of Philosophy at University of Hull and Middlesex University; the Department of Women's Studies, Lancaster University; the Center for Ethical Philosophy, Durham University; and the London Institute of Philosophy, University of London; and finally colleagues at the Cinquantaire du Deuxième Sexe Conference, Paris; the Legacies of Simone de Beauvoir Conference, Pennsylvania State University; and the Society for Women in Philosophy Conference: 50th Anniversary of *The Second Sex*, London.

Eva Gothlin's book on Beauvoir, *Sex and Existence*, has been an invaluable resource. Iris Marion Young took the time to be a respondent to my paper on Beauvoir at the central APA in 2002, and in that year Linda Singer's memorial lecture fund sponsored a helpful talk at Miami University. I acknowledge the memory of Eva Gothlin, Iris Marion Young, and Linda Singer.

Funding support was first provided by a 1999–2001 large Australian Research Council grant that led to books on Luce Irigaray and Simone de Beauvoir, and subsequently by an internal research grant from Northwestern University. I also thank the University of Sydney, who supported this project with a New South Wales Residency Expatriate Scientists Award in 2006 and St Mary's College and the Institute of Advanced Study,

Durham University, who awarded me a visiting research fellowship in 2007. The Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung, Berlin provided support in the final stages. These institutions provided conducive research environments, and I thank them and the referees of these grants for their time and support.

Earlier versions of material used in chapters three, four, and five appeared in “Enemies and Reciprocities,” *MLN* 119, 4 (2004): 656–671; “Vulnerability and Metamorphosis,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 16, 2 (2005): 61–87; and “Repetition Facility: Beauvoir on Women’s Time,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 21, 51 (2006): 327–342. I thank the referees of these journals for their comments.

Some of the first work I read on Simone de Beauvoir was by Michèle le Doeuff and Max Deutscher, this while taking courses at the University of Sydney taught by Moira Gatens and Paul Crittenden. I acknowledge them and the many Beauvoir scholars who have provided intellectual community. Margaret Simons, long engaged in editing and promoting English translations of Beauvoir’s work, has been a friendly resource on a number of occasions. A number of Beauvoir scholars have corrected my errors or disagreed with me in stimulating ways, and I have endeavored to mention similar and alternative positions where possible. I discovered Doris Ruhe’s 2006 work on Beauvoir during my copyediting, and I thank her for sending me her work and for her generous cordiality to me in Germany. I have added bibliographic references to Ruhe in some footnotes and direct the reader to her *Contextualiser le Deuxième sexe* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 2006), which also stresses Beauvoir’s writings on America and the relationship between writings on race by Beauvoir’s contemporaries and her approach to sex.

My thanks to many colleagues and graduate and undergraduate students at Northwestern University. Michael’s excellent company has meant a great deal, as ever. I have been very glad to be able to talk about the book in various ways with Pepita, Eliz, and Jill, and with Monique, François, Françoise, Tricia, Pat, Rico, Linnell, Lisabeth, Ross, Genny, Susan, Quentin, Dan, Robyn, Tina, Emily, Ros, Dan, Jennifer, Robyn, Paul, Moira, Barbara, Catherine, and Erik. Particular thanks to Ewa Ziarek, with whom I have twice now exchanged manuscripts in progress.

At Cambridge University Press I thank Richard Fisher and Rosanna Christian, and Anoop Chaturvedi and the copyediting and composition team at Aptara.

Regarding referencing and translations, I have cited existing translations, indicated as “trans. mod.” if I have modified them. At the time of writing, a

new translation of *The Second Sex* has been commissioned. I have included the page number of the existing US version of the translation (indicated as US), then the UK version (indicated as UK), followed by the page number of the first or second volume of the original French (thus, FrII269 indicates page 269 of the second volume of the French). References to editions used are found in the footnotes.

Introduction: Simone de Beauvoir's Conversions

We are adopting the perspective of existentialist ethics. [*La perspective que nous adoptons, c'est celle de la morale existentialiste.*]

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

We can clearly see Simone de Beauvoir's technique, her *métis*, her craftiness with and towards the doctrinal philosophy she has accepted. It is a technique of reintroduction which undermines the structure. [*D'un point de vue méthodologique, on aperçoit bien ici la technique de Simone de Beauvoir, sa métis à l'égard de la philosophie doctrinale qu'elle a accepté de recevoir: c'est une technique de réintroduction qui bouleverse la structure.*]

Michèle Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice*/L'étude et le rouet

Unexpectedly, after negligible interest in feminist thought and activism,¹ Simone de Beauvoir wrote in the 1940s a far-reaching work on the condition of women. Two decades later it would prove vital in the upsurge of feminist movements. Though widely considered their watershed text, *The Second Sex* was likely conceived as a *post*-feminist work. In 1949 feminism seemed to Beauvoir to have accomplished its main aim of women's enfranchisement – granted in France five years previously – in addition to access to education and employment. If women were still “the other,” Beauvoir concluded that something more was needed: a new kind of analysis.

The writing of *The Second Sex* in 1949 by a French philosopher and novelist has been interpreted from many perspectives: biographical; Beauvoir's

¹ “One question that was causing a lot of spilled ink at the time was female suffrage: during the municipal election Maria Vérone and Louise Weiss were campaigning furiously and were quite right to do so. But as I was apolitical [*comme j'étais apolitique*] and would not have availed myself of my voting privilege had I possessed it [*et que je n'aurais pas usé de mes droits*], it hardly mattered to me whether my rights were acknowledged or not [*il m'était tout à fait égal qu'on me les reconnût ou non*],” Simone de Beauvoir (describing the period 1934–5), *The Prime of Life*, ed. Peter Green (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1962), 257.

personal resistance to the confining conventions of bourgeois femininity; her affiliation with existentialism; her background in the writings of Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre. To be added to this list is a further lever Beauvoir used to rethink the making of the sexes: a theoretical approach and methodology she had encountered in analyses of race relations in the United States, including the work of Richard Wright and Gunnar Myrdal.² “Just as in America,” she repeated a formulation attributed to both Myrdal and Wright, thereby transposing a discussion of race to a discussion of sex, “the problem is not with blacks [*il n’y a pas de problème noir*], rather there is a white problem,³ just as ‘anti-semitism is not a Jewish problem: it is our problem’; so the woman problem has always been a problem for men [*le problème de la femme a toujours été un problème d’hommes*].”⁴ When she later analyzed the alterity of aging, she would cite

² Margaret Simons was one of the first commentators to discuss the influence of Myrdal and Wright on Beauvoir, in *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race and the Origins of Existentialism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), and the connection has also been taken up by Vikki Bell, and by Doris Ruhe. Ursula Tidd notes that, according to an interview between Wright’s biographer Michel Fabre and Beauvoir, the latter first became familiar with the work of Wright in 1940, introduced to it by Sylvia Beach (Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir: Gender and Testimony* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 187, citing Michel Fabre, “An Interview with Simone de Beauvoir,” *The World of Richard Wright* [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985], 253–5). Wright traveled to France in 1946, where he met with Léopold Sédar Senghor and Beauvoir, and Beauvoir spent time with Wright and his wife, Ellen, in 1947, during her first visit to the United States. Sartre referred to Wright in 1946 in his *Anti-Semite and Jew*, attributing to him the comment, “There is no Negro problem in the United States, there is only a White problem,” which in turn was attributed by Beauvoir to Myrdal in *The Second Sex* (trans. H. M. Parshley [London: Methuen, 1988], 159; [New York: Vintage, 1989], 152). The comment has been attributed to both Wright and James Baldwin, and is foregrounded in Myrdal’s 1944 work *American Dilemma*, and cited by Beauvoir in *America Day by Day*, *The Second Sex*, and *Old Age/The Coming of Age (La Vieillesse)*. See Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Bros, 1944); Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, trans. Carol Cosman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 237; Beauvoir, *Old Age*, trans. Patrick O’Brian (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1977), 100; Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken, 1948), 152; and Vikki Bell, “Owned Suffering: Thinking the Feminist Political Imagination with Simone de Beauvoir and Richard Wright,” *Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism*, eds. S. Ahmed, J. Kilby, C. Lury, M. McNeil, and B. Skeggs (London: Routledge, 2000), 61–76. See also Doris Ruhe, *Contextualiser le deuxième sexe* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 2006).

³ Here, she adds the note: “cf Myrdall [sic], *American Dilemma*,” Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US152, UK159, Fr1216.

⁴ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US128, UK159, Fr1216, tr. mod. (*De même qu’en Amérique il n’y a pas de problème noir mais un problème blanc; de même que «l’anti-sémitisme n’est pas un problème juif: c’est notre problème»; ainsi le problème de la femme a toujours été un problème d’hommes.*). After her reference to “problème blanc,” Beauvoir adds the footnote to Myrdal; then after her reference to anti-semitism, she adds a footnote to Sartre’s *Réflexions sur la question juive*. Note Sartre’s assumption in *Anti-Semite and Jew* that the reader he is addressing is not Jewish, and that he attributes the comment to Richard Wright: “Richard Wright, the Negro writer, said recently: ‘There is no Negro problem in the United

the formulation anew, proposing of the aged that “their problem is strictly a problem for active adults [*un problème d’adultes actives*].”⁵

These formulations represented at least two questions in her work. If sex, race, and age are the constituted problem of those who prefer to think of themselves as unsexed, unraced, and unaging, how can that problematic be integrated with elements derived from philosophical problematics of intentionality, ontological difference, and nothingness? Further, what of Beauvoir’s transpositions between race, sex, and generational difference? How might a language generated to address race have to be modified in its possible application to class, sex, or age differentials? How do ethical and political formulations change as they modulate between differing forms of alterity?

Beauvoir announced that her perspective was that of an “existentialist ethics” (*la morale existentialiste*) without announcing that the nexus was hardly self-evident. It had been deemed incoherent by Georg Lukács in one of the first serious readings of her work⁶ and caused her partner, Jean-Paul Sartre, so much trouble that he had to abandon the sizable manuscript for what was to have been his ethics, the anticipated sequel to *Being and Nothingness*. Beauvoir tended not to draw scrutiny to her *method* – as opposed to her themes – as distinctive or controversial. She enjoyed the prediction that her subject matter would be unpalatable for her reader, introducing both 1949’s *The Second Sex* and 1970’s *La Vieillesse* (*Old Age/The Coming of Age*) by foreshadowing, with possible relish, the reader’s likely resistance. She begins the latter, a 700-page work, with the explanation that it confronted a “forbidden subject,” as she had previously done – “what a furious outcry I caused” (*quel tollé j’ai soulevé!*).⁷ The first lines of *The Second Sex* affirm that its subject is irritating. Gladly identifying her topics as unpalatable, she minimized a problematizing discussion of her methodology.

Beauvoir’s two most substantial projects, on sexual and generational alterity, were prepared with intensive research. Having decided to write about women, her next step was an attempt to work through everything that

States, there is only a White problem.’ In the same way, we must say that anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem; it is *our* problem,” 152.

⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *Old Age*, trans. Patrick O’Brian (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1977), 100, trans. mod.

⁶ Georg Lukács, *Existentialisme ou marxisme*, trans. E. Kelemen (Paris: Nagel, 1948), 160–98.

⁷ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 7.

had been written about women,⁸ an extravagant approach later repeated for *La Vieillesse*. This saw the philosophy *agrégée*⁹ immersed in biology,

⁸ Letters of 2nd, 9th, and 11th January 1948, Simone de Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair: Letters to Nelson Algren* (New York: New Press, 1998), 135, 138, 140.

⁹ Beauvoir had passed, coming in second (after Sartre), the *agrégation* in philosophy, this being the most prestigious academic examination in France, and one which guaranteed her a state teaching position. The achievement was considerable in that she was not, like her colleagues Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Paul Nizan, a “*normalien*,” i.e., not a student at the *Ecole normale supérieure*, the most elite institution preparing students for the *agrégation*. It was newly possible for women to study at the E.N.S., as did Beauvoir’s contemporaries Simone Pétrement and Simone Weil. But the Sorbonne appears to have been considered most appropriate for Beauvoir by her family, her mother having rejected an elite training program for girls at Sèvres (see Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* [London: Jonathan Cape, 1990], 92). Already at a disadvantage, she was also the examination’s youngest-ever candidate, and her previous schooling had been inferior (for Sartre the prestigious Lycées Henri IV and Louis-le-Grand, for Beauvoir the mediocre Institut Adeline Désir, a Catholic school for girls, for whose poor training she would have to compensate when later enrolled at the Institut Sainte-Marie and taking classes at the Sorbonne). Also, during the period leading up to her sitting for the *agrégation* she was impatient for her independence and completed a four-year program in three years (Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 121). Once qualified and guaranteed permanent employment in 1929, she seems to have virtually ceased writing and active philosophical research for a number of years, deferring her first teaching position until 1931 to live from private and part-time teaching in Paris, and then relying on her past scholarship to prepare her *lycée* classes. When she did write, she experimented with fiction rather than philosophy. Perplexed commentators have offered various theories, particularly because in 1929 her plan had been to work in ethics and because she had been sufficiently committed to philosophy to resist her family’s opposition (Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 92, 140). However, she recounts that Sartre, whose intellectual superiority she never doubted, demolished in three hours the “pluralist ethics” she had formulated in 1929, and she also describes the discovery that the prestige *lycée*- and E.N.S.-trained *normaliens* had a far more solid training and depth of culture (see Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, trans. James Kirkup [Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1963], 340–3. Beauvoir’s memoirs depict a swift transition from the student’s passion for philosophy to the *agrégée*’s conviction that Sartre is the real philosopher. The juxtaposition is startling – in 1929 she had happily and confidently prepared for the examinations with her *normalien* friends and triumphed. She describes herself the next year leaving the philosophical conversations to Aron and Sartre “since my mind moved too slowly for them” (Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 32). The countering anecdote is often recounted that her *agrégation* jury hesitated on whether to award Sartre or Beauvoir first prize: they did not want to deny it to Sartre (who, despite views about his promise, had not succeeded in his *agrégation* the previous year), yet believed that Beauvoir might have been the better philosopher (Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 145–6, 269). There followed a long period during which Beauvoir seems to have disconnected from her studies, after her accelerated educational program and the intense efforts needed to compensate for her poor training. One could speculate that a period of “burnout” may have occurred. Also, Beauvoir’s teaching qualification was not unrelated to her and her family’s expectation that she would find some means of earning her living. Once this had been accomplished, it may have taken considerable time to reinvent her motivations. Sartre had long believed that he would be a gifted writer, an ambition reinforced by his family and colleagues (see, for example, his autobiographical sketch, *Words*) and one which guided his studies. Beauvoir hoped for personal autonomy. Accordingly, Sartre saw his *agrégation* as the beginning of his intellectual promise, while in the short term, Beauvoir seems to have treated hers as a concluding accomplishment. His success was followed by no break in his intellectual work; rather, the achievement provoked a period of vigorous intellectual activity and writing: during his initial military service (1929–30), his teaching at Le Havre (1931–3, during which time he was already working on *Nausea*), applications for overseas

anthropology, psychoanalysis, economics, sociology, politics, history, and the history of literature, as if the two projects would only be that much more robust for their engagement with the diverse extant studies. Beauvoir's drawing on plural disciplines has generally been considered more of an oddity than a strength, particularly where the discussion of data or approaches from one context seems to have the potential to call into question another. She refers to biological facts in *The Second Sex* and also claims, from a different perspective, that there can be no pure biological facts. She presents economically minded solutions to inequality but considers such solutions reductive. With respect to the number of disciplinary approaches she puts into play, she does not make a case for their compatibility, nor does she stress possible incompatibilities.

At first, readers primarily reacted to the themes, and *The Second Sex* in particular provoked a strong public response.¹⁰ Later taken up as an indispensable work with respect to feminist movements dating from the 1960s, *The Second Sex* brought an original descriptive precision to women's lives – as a humdrum of domestic spaces to be maintained and adorned, of repetitive activities pursued in a context of constrained spaces and choices, of dull, predictable patterns of behavior between the sexes, between women, between women and their families. The controversial aspects of the material were first located in its references to sex, and eventually in its politics: Was Beauvoir antagonistic to maternity? What sorts of possible solutions arose in her work? How much store did she set by technological innovations, economic independence, and resistance to capitalism? And how serious was the weak degree of differentiation in Beauvoir's work between women of different races and classes?

work and study, and a research grant in Berlin (1933–4), with his first book, on the imagination, appearing in 1936. During this same period, Beauvoir prepared her classes minimally and earned her living. After passing her *agrégation* in 1929, she tried an aborted three chapters of fiction in 1931, an aborted novel manuscript in 1932, and a collection of stories rejected by publishers (*When Things of the Spiritual Come First*, which as Bair notes was “the first writing she had completed since her university examinations almost ten years earlier,” *Simone de Beauvoir*, 206). Only during 1938–9 did she begin her first book, *L'Invitée*, completing it in 1941. Accepted by Gallimard in 1942, it would not be published until 1944, fifteen years after her *agrégation*. *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, her first philosophical work, was written in 1943, and appeared in 1944. These biographical details come from Bair, who notes that Beauvoir spent a good deal of the fallow period intensively correcting Sartre's voluminous manuscripts (notice that during this same period Sartre produced *Nausea*, *The Wall*, his two books on the imagination, *Transcendence of the Ego*, and *Being and Nothingness* all, on Bair's account, heavily edited by Beauvoir).

¹⁰ The public and intellectual controversy surrounding its publication is documented in Ingrid Galster, *Le deuxième sexe de Simone de Beauvoir, textes réunis et présentés par Ingrid Galster* (Paris: Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 2004).

Her scholarly commentators have more recently directed attention to what was, from the publication of *The Second Sex* onward, just as maverick as the themes: Beauvoir's method. Beauvoir did little to thwart the fact that she was associated from the first with the work of Sartre. She echoed in print the occasional Sartrean formulation, giving some page references to *Being and Nothingness* and later to *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, offering a spirited and lengthy defense in *Les temps modernes* of Sartre's philosophy against Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of him,¹¹ perhaps even writing some communications signed by Sartre.¹² Sartre's substantial public profile and the 1943 publication of *Being and Nothingness* meant that any theoretical discordances with Beauvoir's subsequent publications would often be evaluated, where attention was paid to them, through the lens of Sartre's work. For these reasons, her method and theory were long overshadowed, not only by her themes and politics, but also by that relationship.

It is not surprising that the coalescing of interest in Beauvoir as a thinker and methodologist first occurred via the task, as many scholars have seen it, of disengaging her from these Sartrean associations. In the ongoing life of Beauvoir's work, a certain degree of resistance or friction between authorial statements about her work, or its most overt appearance, has become intertwined with attempts to extricate it from Sartrean affiliations or otherwise interpret it against the grain.¹³ Some have reversed directions of influence,¹⁴ some have significantly broadened the body of figures with whom Beauvoir is understood to have philosophical affiliations (thus the most important recent studies have assessed Beauvoir's engagements with Merleau-Ponty, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Marx, and Bergson, usually arguing that these engagements are far more important than the affiliation

¹¹ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Sartre and Ultrabolshevism," in *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, ed. J. Stewart (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 35–447; and Beauvoir, "Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism," in Stewart, *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, 448–91.

¹² Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 567.

¹³ Many of Beauvoir's recent feminist commentators cite her judgment that she was not really a philosopher (on this, see Margaret Simons, "Introduction," *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. M. A. Simons (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 1–12, 2) so as to dispute it. Le Doeuff recounts that Beauvoir considered Le Doeuff's critical thoughts on Sartre's promise to "take Beauvoir in hand" a misinterpretation, and Beauvoir perhaps disliked the fact that Le Doeuff's innovative and constructive readings of her work took the route of criticizing Sartre (see Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.*, trans. Trista Selous [Oxford, U.K. and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991], 137).

¹⁴ Edward and Kate Fullbrook have argued that some philosophical ideas presented in *Being and Nothingness* originated with Beauvoir and are evident in *She Came to Stay* (*L'invitée*) (see E. Fullbrook and K. Fullbrook, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Remaking of an Intellectual Legend* [New York: Basic Books, 1994]).

with Sartre), whereas others have perceived that there are more ingenious ways of understanding the possible relations with Sartre. For example, ostensive fidelity can operate as tacit critique, undermining, exposure, or reevaluation. Whether consciously intended or not, such surreptitious critique of early Sartreanism could be identified as an intelligent intervention, and it is the similarly innovative Michèle Le Doeuff to whom readers are particularly indebted for this suggestion.¹⁵

Beauvoir takes a great deal of trouble to “define” woman in a way that literally, as Nancy Bauer has argued, invents this as a philosophical problem.¹⁶ The author is characteristically unwilling to present her method as a point of possible interrogation. Women’s alterity, not “*la morale existentialiste*,” is presented in the guise of a problem. As a result we find Beauvoir declaring adherence to an existentialist ethics in the early pages of *The Second Sex* without defining it. Nor does she identify it as palpably different from the existentialist ethics she had formulated in previous works, “Moral Idealism and Political Realism,” *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and *The Blood of Others*. For example, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* concerns the multivalent ambiguity of existence, our state of existing in various divided modes that cannot be reconciled: freedom and thing, being for itself and being for others, historical and negating, fixed and transcendent, isolated and connected, consciousness of the world and being part of the world of which we are conscious,¹⁷ and the fact that, as she later writes in *Prime*

¹⁵ Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia’s Choice*, 56, 108, and see Le Doeuff, “Operative Philosophy: Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism,” in *Critical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. E. Marks (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987), 144–54.

¹⁶ “To say that it is a problem for philosophy is to propose that insofar as philosophy fails to take account of the being of woman it cannot lay claim to the universality which, by its own lights, it must strive” (Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophy and Feminism* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2001], 1).

¹⁷ For discussions of the nuances of ambiguity in *Ethics of Ambiguity*, see Gail Weiss, “Introduction to an Ethics of Ambiguity,” *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret Simons (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 279–88; and Monika Langer, “Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on Ambiguity,” *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Claudia Card (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 87–106. Prior to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, the term briefly appears in 1944 in her *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, trans. Marybeth Timmermann (*Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons, 105, 99); in a reference to the ambiguity of ethics in “Moral Idealism and Political Realism” of 1945 (Beauvoir, “Moral Idealism and Political Realism,” trans. Anne Deing Cordero, in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons, 188); in short pieces published in 1946 entitled “Sartre” (“If Sartre’s attitude may seem paradoxical, it is because the human condition is ambiguous, and Jean-Paul Sartre is a man who has fully assumed his condition as a man,” 233); and in 1946 in “Eye for an Eye.” Here the term is used to stress that we are both body and negating consciousness, and “tragic ambiguity” is identified in the fact that we are “at the same time a freedom and a thing, both unified and scattered, isolated by his subjectivity and nonetheless coexisting at the heart of the world with other men” (*Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical*

of Life, “death challenges our existence, [but] it also gives meaning to our lives.”¹⁸ *The Blood of Others* concerns the inevitable impingement of our actions on others. Here, some form of possible authenticity seems to be attributed to a responsible subject who painfully recognizes this impingement rather than seeking, impossibly, to avoid it. In *The Second Sex* and *Old Age*, works that presented themselves as indifferent to the problems of theoretical inconsistency that were to preoccupy her late-twentieth-century readers, Beauvoir would establish a network of multiple, interlocking, and auto-resisting concepts of ethics, some of which reinforce each other, some of which undermine each other. In the light of Beauvoir’s preoccupation with alterity and freedom, a redirection of focus to the method of her work could be said to amount to its conversion.

Some parallels to the web-like conceptual structure of *The Second Sex* are to be found in the sizable collection of notes and fragments published as Sartre’s *Notebooks for an Ethics*,¹⁹ and parallel appeals are made by both authors to notions of generosity, risk, the gift, and a (converted) notion of conversion. In addition, there are multiple notions of ethics in these pages, not all of which are compatible. But this incomplete manuscript remains a collection of notebook fragments, the expression of an intended system that its author could not realize, or so it seems, with the elements at hand. By contrast, Beauvoir was able to realize a viable, historically influential project drawing on philosophical elements many commentators have considered to be highly unstable. The instability turned to her favor, as she addressed a form of existence that she deemed to be accordingly unstable.

Writings, ed. Simons, 258). On this see Kristana Arp, “Introduction to ‘An Eye for An Eye,’” in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, 239–44.

¹⁸ Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 731, and see her first statement concerning ambiguity in an early version of *Ethics of Ambiguity*: “From the moment he is born, from the instant he is conceived, a man begins to die; the very movement of life is a steady progression toward the decomposition of the tomb. This ambivalence is at the heart of every individualized organism . . . man knows it. For him, this life that makes itself by unmaking itself is not just a natural process; it itself thinks itself [*elle se pense elle-même*]” (Beauvoir, “Introduction to an Ethics of Ambiguity,” in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons, 289–98, 288).

¹⁹ Lundgren-Gothlin identifies the echoes between *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and the *Cahiers* concerning the term “conversion.” As she notes, the latter manifests Sartre’s interest in Marxism, seen also in other texts written immediately after the publication of *Being and Nothingness*, and his newfound interest in the possibility of some form of reciprocal recognition (a possibility rejected in *Being and Nothingness*), and in the possibility that the other can prolong rather than negate my freedom (see Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *The Sex of Existence: Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex*, trans. Linda Schenck [London: Athlone, 1996], 150). On the importance of conversion in Sartre’s ethics, see Thomas Anderson, *Sartre’s Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity* (Chicago and La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1993).

Giving herself the aim of articulating women's situation, the clash between possible conceptions of ethics should not necessarily be understood as the author's impediment. Arguably, Beauvoir could only articulate women's situation, as she saw it, by relying on incompatible definitions of ethics.²⁰ Such a conclusion could only emerge if one were willing to grant that theoretical incompatibility need not weaken Beauvoir's arguments and proposals. Certainly, her point is that the subjugation of women is itself a paradox. Women are equal, and they are definable in terms of an irrecusable freedom. If they are nonetheless constrained, if there has been a diminishing not only of their material conditions but also of the very freedom of consciousness that, via a definition accepted by Beauvoir, is not diminishable, the paradox would belong to women's situation rather than to a deficiency in her understanding of freedom. It was a paradox with which she intended to startle the reader: women could not – by a definition of freedom to which Beauvoir appealed – be less free. And yet, she persuasively argued, so they were.²¹

Once Beauvoir had established from the first pages of her book that her framework was to be some form of existentialist ethics, it was not inconsistent with the paradox of women's subjugation that the condition be analyzed through concepts of freedom, ethics, politics, and the social that could strike the reader as incompatible. Beauvoir could be associated with a lineage of theorists who have, in different ways, stressed the paradoxical position of those subordinated. Unlike Marx, she credits no dialectical movement with the potential for an inevitable and progressive transformation of the subjugated, and unlike Rousseau she could have no confidence in a guiding voice of nature. Unlike the elegant interpretation by Joan

²⁰ Although I find it productive as a means for interpreting the contradictions of *The Second Sex*, there is likely disagreement about this suggestion. Consider, for example, Le Doeuff's view that "by saying in a contradictory way that 'we have won the fight,' and that 'no woman has ever had a chance,' Simone de Beauvoir seems to have missed the point that every woman's life is lived in contradiction," a comment to which she adds the endnote in response to an obviously imagined query, "In the last part of *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir says on several occasions 'the independent woman is split.' This is not at all what I am trying to say here. I am thinking of a contradiction set up by institutions, not a 'split' of the psychological type, and I think contradictions affect the lives of all women, not just those of the 'independent' ones" (*Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.* 128, 333n).

²¹ Sonia Kruks maintains that Beauvoir relies on two concepts of freedom, practical and ontological. This does not necessarily alleviate their possible conflict. If practical freedom provides the air to the dove of ontological freedom, there is no conflict. But if Beauvoir considers, as she often does, that a debate about ontological freedom needs to give its attention to practical freedom, rather than be distracted from it, then there is a different kind of tension (see Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence, Freedom, Subjectivity and Society* [London: Unwin Hyman, 1990], 86–90).

Scott of French women's exclusion from citizenship,²² Beauvoir analyzes the paradoxes of women's inequality through a methodological form that (intentionally or not) relies on some of the contradictions in question, which she also highlights and discusses. Contradictions are thematized in Beauvoir's work as a crucial heuristic in terms of which to understand women's position; but, in addition to being described, contradictions are operative in the mobile network of theoretical elements in *The Second Sex* and in Beauvoir's work more generally, and they have been the object of reflection in philosophical debate about her work.

Beauvoir might not declare the limitations of existentialist ethics, but it has been said that her texts negotiate with them.²³ Certainly what emerges from her writing is the inadequacy of many of the theoretical models to which she refers to answer questions about women, reproduction, femininity, oppression, subjugation, and inequity. This is a powerful, tacit reading of the theoretical language of some of her philosophical colleagues of the day. According to the rhetorical tone of the work, she confidently supposes the plausibility of moving between, and juxtaposing, their models, but what arises in her work is a simultaneous articulation of fracture points created as she does so. Thus, Engels does not only fail to answer a question about sex subjugation overtly put by Beauvoir, but he also fails to answer to a model concerned with sexuality and embodiment attributable to Merleau-Ponty. Through Beauvoir's appeal to them, a conversation occurs, not just between Beauvoir and Engels, or Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, but indirectly between Engels and Merleau-Ponty on the topic of women. Beauvoir mentions that her framework is informed by the analyses of embodiment by Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Heidegger:

If the body is not a *thing*, it is a situation, as viewed in the perspective I am adopting – that of Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. It is our grasp on the world and the outline of our projects. [*Dans la perspective que j'adopte – celle de Heidegger, de Sartre, de Merleau-Ponty – si le corps n'est pas une chose, il est une situation: c'est notre prise sur le monde et l'esquisse de nos projets.*]²⁴

But the reader is familiar with the pointed debate between Sartre and Heidegger, the latter accused by the former, as Heidegger discusses at

²² Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), ix.

²³ See note 14. ²⁴ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US34, UK66, Fr172 trans. mod.

length in the Zollikon Seminars, of neglecting embodiment.²⁵ Meanwhile, one strains Heidegger's work if one attempts to foreground gender, sexual difference, or sexuality in its context. Sartre's work strains similarly if one turns to contemplate gender through his optic,²⁶ though he does offer theoretically consistent analyses of sexuality.²⁷ A less lurid writer, Merleau-Ponty can be similarly described, yet the differences between his and Sartre's notions of embodiment are well known and had been earlier highlighted by Beauvoir herself.²⁸ Inconsistent as they are, one point shared by these philosophers is that they are indifferent to a thematization of gender or sexual difference, and they seem unsuited to such a project. What then should we make of Beauvoir's declaration that her analytical approach to the situation of women is affiliated with the analyses of embodiment of all three of these philosophers at once? In my opinion, this is not a declaration to be taken literally. While the relations between Beauvoir and these figures are complex and bear extensive interpretation, she did not literally "adopt" the perspective of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger. It is nonetheless an effective declaration, and among the first of its results is its rhetorically taking for granted that these three philosophers should all be appropriate to her project. If the gesture causes a fissure – if the reader is less sure than Beauvoir appears to be – that Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger will lend themselves well to a thinking of women's situation and of women's embodiment, we are indirectly confronted with a problematic embedded in Beauvoir's work: namely, how profound is that limitation, and could their projects be converted? Minimally, Beauvoir performs the gesture of suggesting that the three should be appraised

²⁵ "If Jean-Paul Sartre reproaches Heidegger for having dealt poorly with the problem of the body, then this 'poor treatment' has two reasons: 1. The phenomena of the body cannot be dealt with without a sufficient elaboration of the fundamentals of existential being-in-the-world. 2. So far a sufficiently useful description of the phenomenon of the body has not emerged, that is, one viewed from the perspective of the being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars Protocols-Conversations-Letters*, ed. Medard Boss, trans. Franz Mayr [Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2001], 157).

²⁶ Sex and gender would appear in the double registers of facticity and choice/freedom, and Judith Butler has discussed the limitations of the vision of gender that emerges as a result (see Butler, "Sex and Gender in Beauvoir's *Second Sex*," *Yale French Studies* 72 [1986], 35–49).

²⁷ Having almost equated the ontological nothingness at the heart of being with the desire to appropriate objects, Sartre fits his interpretations of heterosexual sexual desire, depicted from a male perspective, into this perspective (see Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes [New York: Washington Square Press, 1966], 735–6, 739).

²⁸ Beauvoir, "Review of The Phenomenology of Perception," trans. Timmermann, in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons, 159–64. Stewart's (ed.) *The Debate between Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998) includes essays on the many substantive differences between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty.

by what was certainly, in her day, a new standard for philosophy: its appropriateness for thinking the situation of women. Beauvoir does not declare that the three *ought* to be resources, she states that they are, and the results fall out accordingly: one is obliged to speculate about whether they could be, and under what conditions. Their mutual relationships also take on a new hue: Merleau-Ponty offers the most successful articulation of a body-subject, important to Beauvoir's stress on female embodiment. Sartre offers a far more developed account of sexuality thought of as a project, and, once politicized, that project is useful to Beauvoir's account of the politicization of female sexuality. While she was certainly aware of the profound differences among these thinkers, she makes no mention of the differences at this point,²⁹ nor of their possible incompatibilities. Thus, seemingly in conversation with her colleagues, Beauvoir's work also offers a new problem in terms of which they can converse with each other.

One of the main points of controversy among the readers of Beauvoir is the identification of her intellectual debts and affiliations. Sometimes recognizing the mutual troubling of the theoretical languages in Beauvoir's work, commentators concentrate on a selection, focusing, in addition to Beauvoir's relation to Sartre, on her relation to Hegel and Marx (Lundgren-Gothlin), to Husserl and Irigaray (Bergoffen), to Merleau-Ponty (Kruks), to Husserl and Merleau-Ponty (Heinämaa), to Hegel (Bauer), or to Levinas (Sanford). To be sure, one can't write the "whole book" on Beauvoir, and reproducing all the voices of a text or an author amounts to an impossible reverie for plenitude.³⁰ But whenever relatively consistent debts within Beauvoir's work are isolated, there is a risk of minimizing the conflicting registers in her writing, deemphasizing the complexity of their interrelation, their means of dislodging and challenging each other.

One of the singularities of Beauvoir's work is the ostensive generosity to the theorists she brings to her table. It is a projected generosity, involving a strange reverie in which writers ranging from George Eliot, Colette, Dorothy Parker and Hélène Deutsch to Myrdal and Marx, Freud and Lévi-Strauss, Kant and Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Leiris all contribute to establishing the basis for an

²⁹ Though see again note 28, concerning Beauvoir's short but accurate appraisal of Merleau-Ponty and his differences from Sartre, published four years earlier.

³⁰ See Jacques Derrida and Derek Attridge on the "adolescent dream of keeping a trace of all the voices" ("[T]here remains in me an obsessive desire to save . . . what happens – or *fails to happen*. What I should be tempted to denounce as a lure – i.e., totalization or gathering up . . .") ("This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge [New York: Routledge, 1992], 33–75, 25).

interrogation of female alterity, each contributing a few elements from their own stock. Individual contributions may not be identified as calling into question those of their fellow guests,³¹ and the fractures and impasses may be left to the reader's powers of observation. It is also true of Beauvoir's dinner party that the potential tension point of theoretical incompatibility is one of the project's points of interest, and the tacit staging of this issue one of the project's more interesting maneuvers. Would *The Second Sex* have been more satisfying had it declared the likely reluctance of some of its guests, not to mention their mutual incompatibilities? Beauvoir's inventions include her provision of this forum at which a certain number of guests, in the context of a staged exchange with each other, prove obtuse on the topic of women. Her craft is uniquely present in the context she creates for the tracking and diagnosis of these points of failure.

In Beauvoir's view, subjects were collectively rendered other through repetitious habits that were institutionally reinforced, took on sedimented historical meaning, and inflected the embodied perspective of a social individual as body-subject. Class subjugation was less a matter of focus in her work, except insofar as she discussed the repetitious bodily movements of the factory worker.³² Race, gender, and age marginalization were, by contrast, of prime importance, allowing her to focus on lived agedness, youth, race, and sex, insofar as they exhibit shared, if differentiating, social meanings and operate as a locus for power relations. Socially meaningful embodiment thereby provoked her to new concepts of freedom and ethics.

"Hegel or Heidegger?" Beauvoir asked herself, literally.³³ Her treatment of both is cursory, yet the specificity of her approach rewards attention to its detail: it is the means through which she produced a study of the condition of women, to mention her most famous example, not the limitation of that study. Perhaps the staged compatibility and incompatibility of elements and fragments from the range of philosophers brought into play in *The Second Sex* succeeds only because she was cursory? Beauvoir hooks disparate elements from Lévi-Strauss, Marx, Freud, and Merleau-Ponty so they can enter into an exchange, and had the whole of a paradigm been imported,

³¹ Historical women activists and intellectuals, including Mary Wollstonecraft, Olympe de Gouges, and many women writers are mentioned, but her extensive focus on women's literature sways her towards an analysis of its evidentiary value – it serves as testimony of women's situation. However, few women theorists provide substantial methodological or theoretical resources for Beauvoir (with exceptions, such as her references to the psychoanalysts Hélène Deutsch and Karen Horney).

³² Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, trans. Peter Green, 65. *Old Age/La Vieillesse* does stress the impact of class difference on aging.

³³ Entry of January 1941, Beauvoir, *Journal de guerre Septembre 1939–Janvier 1941* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 362. For her discussion of this question, see Linnell Secomb, "Killing Time: Simone de Beauvoir on Temporality and Mortality," *Australian Feminist Studies* 21, 51 (2006), 343–53.

perhaps the veneer of a conversation might have failed before it could begin to engage. She hooks threads which, once pulled, either bring along (or link up with) the fabric in which they are embedded, or, alternatively, unravel it. The analytic work accomplished by Beauvoir is effected either (as the case may be) with the capacity of the thread to fruitfully bring along more of its fabric as the reader pulls at it, or in the unraveling capacity of her hooking.

The theoretical clashes at work in Beauvoir occur between phenomenology and existentialism, psychoanalysis, anthropology, historical materialism, different concepts of freedom, embodiment, temporality, and ethics. Her work engages us with a concept's incapacity or capacity to deal with a particular problem (notoriously in Beauvoir's work, sex, gender, and sexual difference, but also race and age othering), or to cohabitate with a parallel explanatory model (Lévi-Strauss and Engels, for example, or, as Lundgren-Gothlin has argued, Sartre and Hegelian-Marxism³⁴). Staging intersections between such figures, Beauvoir's work provides a context in which they are more likely to transform each other.

"Conversion," the term often used in association with "deliverance and salvation,"³⁵ is borrowed by Sartre and Beauvoir to describe a possible response to their ontologies. First deployed by Sartre, the term is not used literally, but eventually both he and Beauvoir seem to envisage more seriously some form of transformed relationship to being, a possible transformation both discuss in the context of their ethics. Conversion, in the transitive sense of appropriative change of another, is also a term with which to conceptualize Beauvoir's method of abstracting concepts from French and German philosophers and converting them to her purposes. In this sense, it might also be said that she worked by means of alchemic conversion³⁶ – changing the substance in addition to the context and sense

³⁴ Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*.

³⁵ See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 534n. Beauvoir also refers to conversion in connection with Stoic ethics, Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger (for these associations, see Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel, 1976), and see [Chapter 1](#) of this book. Sara Heinämaa stresses the influence of Kierkegaard on Beauvoir, and in this context note her claim that "Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the phenomenological reduction has important structural similarities to Kierkegaard's conception of conversion" – Merleau-Ponty is a dominant influence on Beauvoir according to Kruks and Heinämaa. See Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 19n; Heinämaa, "From Decisions to Passions: Merleau-Ponty's Interpretation of Husserl's Reduction," in *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*, ed. T. Toadvine and L. Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002); and for her influential discussion of connections between Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir, *Situation and Human Existence, Freedom, Subjectivity and Society* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

³⁶ I take the opportunity to mention Catharine Malabou's project *Le change Heidegger- du fantastique en philosophie* (Paris: Editions Leo Scheer, 2004). Malabou uses the notion of conversion

of concepts – of the resources of German and French philosophers such that the “presence” of their phenomenology is powerfully transformed into the *absence* of Beauvoir’s problematic.³⁷ If sexual difference does not arise as a philosophical problem for Heidegger³⁸ – despite Beauvoir’s apparently uncritical referencing of Heidegger as assisting her analysis – her prioritizing the analysis of gender relations occurs in the context of a Heideggerianism that is ill-equipped for that analysis. She is interested in lived embodied experience, including sexual experience. Rather than investigating ontological difference, Beauvoir keeps her attention on ontic embodiment and is thereby obliged to transform the sense of temporality, arguing that women’s

to think about the role of a triumvirate of terms (*Wandel, Wandlung, Verwandlung*) for transformation, metamorphosis, modification, change and mutation, appearing in Heidegger’s work. She presents Heidegger’s work as effecting conversions in many senses – for example, the meanings of “metaphysics,” “the human,” “divinity,” and “language” convert in his work. What she thinks of as “*le change Heidegger*” – the Heidegger-exchange, is one which “accomplishes conversions of ontological, symbolic and existential systems,” 9. The work also describes various ways in which Heidegger’s own work changes itself. As a means of thinking of Heideggerian exchange, Malabou proposes that the process works both in and on Heidegger’s thought, and so both does, and does not, “belong” to that thought (*Parce qu’il opère à la fois dans et sur la pensée de Heidegger, le change Heidegger appartient et n’appartient pas à cette pensée. Il travaille en elle et hors d’elle*),” 9. Malabou acknowledges that the conceptual device of a Heidegger-exchange is also the result of her own intervention, and her interest in thinking about Heidegger’s work by interrogating terms in terms of their potentiality. The interpretation of Beauvoir and Heidegger diverges thoroughly in terms of the sense and exploration of conversion by the two figures; yet, for the purposes of this book, Malabou’s project serves as a promising reminder that to whatever extent a Beauvoirian “conversion” of Heidegger can be established – and a number of Beauvoir’s commentators are engaged in this question – it must be recalled that Beauvoir’s work converted what was already a project of conversion. This line of interrogation has probably not been pursued by her commentators, and might allow for some eventual, further reflection on Beauvoir’s “conversions of conversions,” particularly among those who read Beauvoir in terms of her interest in Heidegger.

³⁷ My suggestion is that the accomplishment of such a conversion can be thought of as one formula for evaluating Beauvoir’s work. I am suggesting that many of these conversions operate “tacitly,” and in this Beauvoir might usefully be contrasted with some aspects of French feminist Luce Irigaray’s work. Little remains tacit in the latter’s well-articulated methodology for rereading the history of philosophy. Irigaray’s project is, in a different sense, to convert a “presence” into an “absence.” The “presence” of subordinating descriptions of women and femininity located by Irigaray in the history of philosophy is reinterpreted, or converted, by Irigaray into what she plausibly depicts as an “absence” or exclusion of alternative, hypothetical possibilities for conceiving women and femininity.

³⁸ On this see Derrida, “Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Martin Heidegger*, ed. N. J. Holland and P. Huntington (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 52–72. Discussing how in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, we are told that “Dasein is neither of the two sexes,” and that, as Derrida comments, “discourse on sexuality could then be abandoned to the sciences or philosophies of life, to anthropology, sociology, biology, or perhaps even to religion or morality,” 54, Derrida nonetheless offers an attentive and closer reading of Heidegger’s need to exclude “sexual-relation,” “sexual difference,” “man-and-woman,” as if these are not “worthy of questioning.” In fact, there should be a means, in this case, of thinking the “pre-differential” of sexuality, what is more original than it, or in it, and there is here an “order of implications” that eventually “opens up thinking to a sexual difference that would not yet be sexual duality,” 72.

lack of equality amounts to an impoverished relationship to time,³⁹ in a sense not expressible by the philosophers of temporality (Bergson, Husserl, Heidegger) she references.

Given that Beauvoir's implicit methodology for analyzing inequities of sex, race, and age is grounded in the conversion of concepts generated, not only from nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy, but also from science, sociology, and anthropology, she does not only (as Le Doeuff has stated of her reading of Lévi-Strauss) cite and undermine ("*cite et sape*"⁴⁰), she also borrows and converts. This can be thought in at least two ways. First, although Beauvoir shares some of her theoretical lexicon with others, the concepts they appear to share usually have, as has often been noted, a transformed significance. In some cases, it is arguable that Beauvoir converted a term she seemingly "referenced" to Sartre, such as "freedom," or "bad faith." But if, for example, freedom is made over by Beauvoir, that also effects a conversion of the context in which we assess the philosophers who provided a resource for Beauvoir's appropriations, Beauvoir's work thereby establishing a new perspective (without making any statements to this effect) from which to evaluate Sartre's early work as inadequate to class, sex, race, and age inequity. One of the algorithms for calculating Beauvoir's success appraises the extent to which her work makes a case textually that a group of theoretical models (psychoanalytic, philosophical, scientific) is unable to adequately address the interlocking of sex subordination with historical and systematic subjugation. Without Beauvoir's intervention, a critical interrogation of the philosophers of her day in terms of their weak capacity to thematize aged, raced, sexed embodiment and subjugation seems that much less plausible. To the extent that Beauvoir's perspectival conversions are successful, the inability of figures such as Heidegger, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Marx to express in a satisfactory way gender formation and the power differentials of sexual difference appears as their limitation. The problem is refracted through their work, reemerging as their, not Beauvoir's, problem.⁴¹ Thus, not so much, or not only, using these philosophers as adapting them, Beauvoir appropriates projects about

³⁹ She makes the same point about workers and the aged in the context of their material, economic, and social devaluation. Her analysis of the temporal implications of inequality can be identified as one of Beauvoir's contributions to philosophies of time.

⁴⁰ Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice*, 108.

⁴¹ In other words, one formula for evaluating her work is her success in suggesting, directly or indirectly, that women's lived experience as feminine and as other constitutes a problem for the phenomenological and existentialist philosophers she references. Such a demonstration would represent a redeployment (effected in turn through the conversion of Myrdal, and Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*) of the point made in *The Second Sex* that women are a problem not so much for themselves

which one might not have thought to ask, What about women? Sexual difference? Racism? Age alterity? Our embodied experience of time? Beauvoir's work powerfully strikes us with the implausibility of asking such questions as German and French philosophers take on the new character of being unable to address her problematic, even though she states that they can.

Beauvoir is not primarily indebted to one particular philosopher, and while questions for many other theorists rebound from her work, her appropriations establish an interconnected cluster of concepts: freedom, *Mitsein*, mutual antagonism, mutual recognition, reciprocity, potlatch, embodiment, ethics, bad faith, mystification, ambiguity. Thus, not only did Beauvoir use multiple theoretical models that were inconsistent, if not incompatible with each other, and not only did Beauvoir, in converting them, sometimes allow them to convert each other, but as she progressively distilled a conceptual web out of this process, concepts that became part of her lexicon began to enter into dialogue with each other. Across the span of early works such as *Ethics of Ambiguity*, *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, and *America Day by Day*, through *The Second Sex* and the late work *Old Age*, Beauvoir analyzed alienation, the experience of bodily disintegration, inauthenticity, recognition, and reciprocity, and through the process her ethics change, establishing competing possibilities in response to the differentials of class, race, gender, and aging.

Thus, in an additional sense one can give to the theme of conversion in Beauvoir's work, she also contests and converts her own theoretical models. Establishing an auto-contesting Beauvoir is an alternative to establishing her city rights by deriving from her work the most coherent or resolved ethics. Instead, we retain a Beauvoir on whose work we can draw to challenge her own ideas where it might be important to do so. In [Chapter 5](#), I provide examples of resources in her work that assist the contestation of her privileged association between an ethics of generosity and idealized erotic relations between men and women.

Finally, if one of the most powerful resources for reading Beauvoir is the suggestion that she can be actively interpreted as undermining – or, as I have also suggested, transforming – philosophies she ostensibly accepts, a further possibility is created. For Beauvoir to import, appropriate, or undermine is for her to carry textual resources that may well be resistant to these conversions. Just as Beauvoir's usages have been adopted in turn by

but for the men who render women other (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US152; UK159; Fr1216, and see notes 2–4).

commentators to rebound back critically at the philosophical context from which she drew, the lines of contestation can also be made to work in the reverse direction. Unless she is to be exempted from the same technique, we can also ask whether Beauvoir's own work embodies elements that resist her conclusions so as to make possible a productive interrogation of her work. The most creative way to understand the relationship between Sartre and Beauvoir is, as has been shown, to ask how the latter undermines the former. But, for an example of a conversion rebounding in the reverse direction, consider Beauvoir's response, dating from "Literature and Metaphysics," to the concept of ambiguity as discussed by Maurice Blanchot. While, I will argue, Beauvoir did convert Blanchotian ambiguity to her purposes, his conception of ambiguity can also be imagined as a silent sleeper, bundled in with other concepts of ambiguity with which Beauvoir engaged and which circulated through her work.

Blanchot's concepts of ambiguity and of literature continued to hold the potential for a productive interrogation of Beauvoir's project. In the final conception of conversion proposed in this work, the materials Beauvoir transformed might sometimes fail to have been thoroughly converted to her purposes, holding out against her, her work carrying that surplus, or reserve, sometimes productively. In such cases, I imagine hypothetical or virtual conversions of Beauvoir's work, which can be conceptualized as yielding alternative possibilities. These include largely unexplored possibilities for an articulation of ethics, held in reserve while she was transforming others. Blanchot could remain the surplus to Beauvoir, all the while that Beauvoir converted him, along with Kant, the Stoics, Heidegger, and Sartre. A maximal encounter between Blanchot and Beauvoir does not take place in her work, but neither is it entirely absent from it. He offered one of the concepts of ambiguity she rerouted to her purposes, and we see her address it, convert it, and carry it over. One can imagine it lurking within Beauvoir's work, not thoroughly changed, a reservoir for alternative possibilities for her project (alternative visions of ethics, ambiguity, bad faith, impossibility, and literature), just as Beauvoir opened up many of her colleagues, in the most surprising ways, to the alternative possibilities arising from her interrogations of sex and sexual difference, race, cultural, and generational difference, and the social forms of embodiment inflected with history and power.

Conversions of Ambiguity

Perhaps it will even become manifest that the total phenomenological attitude and the *epoché* belonging to it are destined in essence to effect, at first, a personal transformation [*eine völlige personale Wandlung*], comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion [*einer religiösen Umkehrung*], which then, however, over and above this, bears within itself the significance of the greatest existential transformation [*der größten existenziellen Wandlung*] which is assigned as a task to mankind as such.

Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences*, #35

In [Beauvoir's] *The Blood of Others* . . . we are present at an evolution [*une évolution*] – more than that, at a veritable overturning [*une véritable retournement*], a conversion [*une conversion*]. And everything makes us believe that this conversion [*cette conversion*] will be definitive, it has 'value', it designates itself to us as a solution and an end, announcing the deplorable appearance of the *Sollen*, of that *Sollen* for which Hegel condemned Fichte to philosophical calamity.

Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*

Between Edmund Husserl's description in 1937 of the phenomenological *epoché* as possibly involving a personal transformation, and Maurice Blanchot's disparaging description in 1949 of an ideal of conversion that he identified in the work of Sartre and Beauvoir, a transformation of phenomenology had taken place. Husserlian intentionality had been converted to Heideggerian being-in-the-world, and in turn to the freedom of French existentialism. Husserl's natural attitude – with few implications for ethics or politics¹ – had been converted to Heidegger's fallenness. This

¹ However, there is an asserted association, seen in the early essays of both Beauvoir and Sartre, between their interpretation of the Stoic *epoché*, the Husserlian *epoché*, and Sartre and Beauvoir's perception of the possibility of ethics. I refer below to Beauvoir's association, in *Ethics of Ambiguity*, of conversion with Husserl's and the Stoic *epoché*, and the latter also makes an appearance in Sartre's "Cartesian Freedom" in a comment (the context is his commentary on Descartes' freedom) on the need to "extend the *epoché* to the moral realm" (Sartre, "Cartesian Freedom," *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, trans.

concept in turn converted into the French problematics of *mauvaise foi*, which eventually converted anew to what Blanchot considered deplorable: a possible – perhaps an incoherent – existentialist ethics. Infused with references to intentionality and *Mitsein*, transcendence, authenticity and bad faith, fault and the irrelevance of fault, freedom and obligation, nothingness, and humanist anthropology, Beauvoir's work stands as the conflictual culmination of all these conversions.

Beauvoir's novels and autobiographical works were popular, but not transformative of the conventions of either form. The author of three works of philosophy (*Pyrrhus and Cineas* [1944], *Existentialisme et la sagesse des nations* [1948], and *Privilèges* [1955]) in addition to the better-known *Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), she evinces clear theoretical preoccupations in these early publications, but her intellectual innovation is most strongly seen in her two larger-scale multidisciplinary works, *The Second Sex* (1949) and *La Vieillesse (Old Age/The Coming of Age)* (1970)), which manifest a characteristic style and methodology for theorizing the contradictory becoming through which women, non-whites, and the aged exist as marginalized, embodied subjectivities even in a context of legal or other forms of institutional social equality.

Annette Michelson [New York: Collier Books, 1962], 180–97, 184). In 1936 Sartre first converts Husserl's intentionality by defending, against his transcendental ego, the concept of an "absolute, impersonal consciousness . . . purified of the I" and that "no longer has anything of the subject"; the ethical implications are taken to be far reaching. This absolute, impersonal consciousness is "quite simply a first condition and an absolute source of existence. And the relation of interdependence established by this absolute consciousness between the Me and the World is sufficient for the Me to appear as endangered before the World, for the Me (indirectly and through the intermediary of states) to draw the whole of its content from the World. No more is needed in the way of a philosophical foundation for an ethics and a politics which are absolutely positive" (Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick [New York: Noonday Press, 1957], 106). As Flynn comments, Sartre understood himself very early in his work to be introducing "an ethical dimension into what was traditionally an epistemological project by asserting that this appeal to a transcendental ego conceals a conscious flight from freedom. The phenomenological reduction that constitutes the objects of consciousness as pure meanings or significations devoid of the existential claims that render them liable to skeptical doubt – such a reduction or 'bracketing of the being question' carries a moral significance as well" (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sartre/>).

Similarly, Sara Heinämaa notes that in some of Beauvoir's first comments about phenomenology in her review of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, Beauvoir also assumed there were such implications. Elaborating on phenomenological intentionality, she comments, "it is impossible to define an object in cutting it off from the subject through which and for which it is object; and the subject reveals itself only through the objects in which it is engaged. Such an affirmation only makes the contents of naïve experience explicit, but it is rich in consequences. Only in taking it as a basis will one succeed in building an ethics to which man can totally and sincerely adhere" (Beauvoir, "Review of *The Phenomenology of Perception*" trans. Marybeth Timmermann, *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons [Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004], 159–64, 160); and see on this Heinämaa, "Introduction to Review of *The Phenomenology of Perception*," in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons, 153–8.

These works display a network of concepts of ethics, some of which tacitly contest each other. The 1949 and 1970 works are usefully interpreted in the context of the earlier *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, *Existentialisme*, and *Ethics of Ambiguity*, retaining concepts of ethics introduced in those early works – such as the invention of values and the capacity to enhance the freedom of the other – while adding additional meanings such as mutual vulnerability and additional forms of reciprocity. *Pyrrhus and Cineas* and *Ethics of Ambiguity* are simpler works than *The Second Sex* and *La Vieillesse*, with fewer layers of enmeshed concepts. Nonetheless, they bear witness to Beauvoir's willingness to allow a cohabitation of ideas that may be inconsistent rather than rigorously interrogate such possible inconsistencies. Even though *Pyrrhus and Cineas* makes a case for our being "free to transcend all transcendence [*libres de transcender toute transcendance*],"² claiming that "the other's freedom is total because the situation is only to be surpassed, and freedom is equal in every surpassing [*la liberté d'autrui est totale puisque la situation n'est que pour être dépassée et que la liberté est égale en tout dépassement*],"³ the work also stresses my capacity to further the other's freedom, and makes a case for my dependence on another's freedom. If, Beauvoir argues, "we give up taking the other for a freedom [*renonçons à prendre autrui pour une liberté*]," we "restrict, accordingly, the possibilities of expanding our being [*restreignons d'autant les possibilités d'expansion de notre être*]."⁴ Similarly, even though, as Georg Lukács noted, *Ethics of Ambiguity* appeals to ontological freedom as a fundamental fact about our being that can be neither augmented nor lessened, Beauvoir also appeals to freedom as a matter of historical development.⁵

Building on the work of commentators who have noted the special resonance of the term "conversion" for Beauvoir,⁶ we can ask, what other

² Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cineas," trans. Timmermann, *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons, 90–149, 141; Beauvoir, *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté suivi de Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (Paris: Gallimard [folio], 2003), 316.

³ Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cineas," 137; Beauvoir, *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté suivi de Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, 306.

⁴ Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cineas," 138; Beauvoir, *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté suivi de Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, 309.

⁵ Lukács dryly claims that it is partly to Beauvoir's credit that she prefers her web of contradictions to a cosmetic suppression of them that would be cowardly and deceptive: "*Mais Madame de Beauvoir ne veut pas- et cela l'honore- tirer toutes les conséquences qui s'imposeraient. Elle préfère se prendre dans un filet de contradictions insolubles qu'à opter résolument pour un renoncement, sublime en apparence et lâche en réalité*" (Lukács, *Existentialisme ou marxisme* [Paris: Nagel, 1948], 188–90, 194).

⁶ See Maurice Blanchot, "The Novels of Sartre," in *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) 191–207, 200; Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex*, trans. Linda Schenck (London: Athlone, 1996) 161, 224; Karen Vintges, *Philosophy as Passion: The Thinking of Simone de Beauvoir* (Bloomington and Indianapolis:

terms have this concentrated intensity? Such terms, I propose, perform the work of conceptual conversion, and include *la réciprocité* (reciprocity), *la répétition*, (repetition), the other (*l'autre*), *l'authenticité* (authenticity), bad faith (*mauvaise foi*), *la générosité* (generosity), ambiguity (*l'ambiguïté*), *la morale* (translated as ethics), and *la conversion* (conversion) itself. They can be thought of as “change-terms” or transformational terms in Beauvoir’s work. Many have been understood as standing for values in Beauvoir’s work, with all the consequent problems of how Beauvoir justifies a cluster of values that she possibly introduces. They may be better understood as points of theory intersection and transformation. Thus, to take one of the most flexible terms in Beauvoir’s lexicon, “reciprocity” is a consistent value throughout her work, from “An Eye for an Eye” onward.⁷ Yet the meaning of “reciprocity” is multiple, taking on, as I argue in Chapter 5, over ten different meanings in her work. These transformations are not reducible to the progressive development of Beauvoir’s thought – one does not see a simple waning of earlier usages in favor of later usages, instead there is an increasingly complex intersection of accumulated meanings for “reciprocity.” If reciprocity is a value, it is also constantly challenged, reconsidered, and redefined in her work.

The terms of conversion in Beauvoir’s work are those that facilitate a dialogue between theoretical approaches, allowing an overlay of competing meanings, sometimes complementary, sometimes not. Other terms would provide further examples, such as “literature,” this being the context for Beauvoir’s aspiration to write the so-called metaphysical or philosophical novel, but also for her to accept, and worry about, the problems of the “thesis-novel.” Blanchot and others have argued that some writings of Sartre and Beauvoir (*Roads to Freedom*, *The Blood of Others*) bear the marks of the thesis novel, whereas other works (*Nausea*, *L’Invitée/She Came To Stay*) disrupt the aspirations of the thesis-novel. The point can be extended, in Beauvoir’s work, to an overlap of conflicting meanings for “literature.” We can locate comments – particularly where she explains autobiographically why she favored literature over philosophy – that indicate that she aspired to convey principles she associated with existentialism in the form of fiction. Other comments –, most notably in Beauvoir’s “Literature and

Indiana University Press, 1996); Eleanore Holveck, *Simone de Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Lived Experience: Literature and Metaphysics* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); and Fredrika Scarth, *The Other Within: Ethics, Politics and the Body in Simone de Beauvoir* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

⁷ Beauvoir, “An Eye for An Eye,” in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons, 245–60, 249.

Metaphysics” – express Beauvoir’s opposition to the thesis-novel. Insofar as Beauvoir wanted to write philosophical fiction that would nonetheless avoid the limitations and problems of the thesis-novel, her work bears the traces of that conflict. Literature, for Beauvoir, is the field of resistance, and occasional dialogue, between her objections to a *roman à thèse* (because the characters risked merely being “incarnated ideas,”⁸ because “the novel is justified only if it is a mode of communication irreducible to any other . . . a true novel . . . allows itself neither to be reduced to formulas nor even to be retold”⁹) and her aspiration nonetheless to write novels expressing philosophical ideas.¹⁰

The cluster of aims, derivations, and transformations surrounding ethics, ambiguity, reciprocity, generosity, and conversion are more complex, allowing a reading of textual and philosophical effects generated by the intersection of the different usages of these terms.

CONVERSIONS

The eventual religious conversion of Augustine of Hippo is narrated as a transformational turn. Obeying what he took to be a divine command in the form of a child’s chant, he snatches up a Bible, which opens to a passage instructing him: “Put you on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences.” He experiences an epiphany: “No further wished I to read; nor was there need to do so. Instantly, in truth, at the end of this sentence, as if before a peaceful light streaming into my heart, all the dark shadows of doubt fled away.”¹¹ When several

⁸ Simone de Beauvoir interviewed by Dominique Aury, “Qu’est-ce que l’existentialisme? Escarmouches et patrouilles” *Les lettres françaises* (Dec. 1, 1945), 4, cited and discussed in Simons, “Introduction to Literature and Metaphysics,” in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons, 263–8, 264.

⁹ Beauvoir, “Literature and Metaphysics,” trans. Véronique Zaytzeff and Frederick M. Morrison, in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons, 269–77, 270.

¹⁰ Consider Beauvoir’s comments in *The Prime of Life*, where she both explains that the novel is not a *roman à thèse* but also comments, as if it is, “I was not satisfied with the ending of *She Came to Stay*: murder is not the solution to the difficulties engendered by coexistence” (Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, ed. Peter Green (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1962), 410. Simons has further researched Beauvoir’s ideas in this respect. She cites comments in Beauvoir’s 1927 student diary (*Diary of a Philosophy Student: Volume 1, 1926–27*, ed. Barbara Klaw, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, Margaret A. Simons, and Marybeth Timmerman [Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006]) concerning her desire to link philosophy and literature in her writing, and cites Beauvoir’s July 1947 article, “An American Renaissance in France,” in which she discusses favorably the prospect of giving philosophy a “novelistic form” (Beauvoir, “An American Renaissance in France,” *The New York Times*, June 22, 1947, 20, cited in Simons, “Introduction to ‘Literature and Metaphysics,’” 264–5).

¹¹ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Image [Doubleday], 1960), bk. 8, ch. XII, 202; also citing Rom. Xiii.13.

references to conversion appear in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and in Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to describe an ethical transformation about whose possibility the authors speculate, what they describe would not have the connotation of definitive transformation or epiphany, but it would anticipate radical subjective change, and Sartre conjured the metaphorical connotations of some kind of alternative "*salut*." Toward the conclusion of his discussion of hatred in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre comments that his "considerations do not exclude the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and salvation. But this can be achieved only after a radical conversion [*mais celle-ci doit être atteinte au terme d'une conversion radicale*] which we can not discuss here."¹² Sartre did not define the conditions for such a radical conversion – nor did he describe in that work what he had in mind – but on occasion, he and Beauvoir envisaged the possibility of radical but achievable change, for example with respect to what Sartre describes as one of the two of our "basic" attitudes toward others, involving indifference, desire, hate, and sadism.¹³ Thus, Sartre asks what kind of ethics might open up from these considerations, but because he claims that *Being and Nothingness* is a study in ontology, not ethics, the book concludes with the promise that possible moral implications will be explored in a subsequent work.¹⁴

Whereas Sartre's early work mysteriously names an ethics about whose possibility he cannot immediately elaborate, ethics are present in several guises and intertwined with concepts of conversion from an earlier stage in the context of Beauvoir's work. These references bear witness to a multiplicity of ideas, not all compatible. One of the concepts of ethics discussed in *Ethics of Ambiguity* relates to one of several of her definitions of authenticity: it would involve our unwillingness to "recognize any foreign absolute [*l'homme authentique ne consentira à reconnaître aucun absolu étranger*]." We would "understand that it is not a matter of being right in the eyes of a God, but of being right in one's own eyes [*d'avoir raison à ses propres yeux*]."

¹² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay of Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 534n; Sartre, *L'Être et le néant, essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 463.

¹³ This being the extreme end of their conception of conversion, as when Sartre describes something equivalent to "*salut*." Their introduction of ethics also has modest inflections, as discussed in footnote 1.

¹⁴ In the same work, Sartre accuses Heidegger's distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity as having illicit moral overtones (see Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 721, 680). Sartre and Beauvoir amplified such questions in their own work with varying degrees of success. For his comments on the status of ethics, see Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1978), 189–242.

Renouncing the thought of seeking the guarantee for one's existence outside of oneself, one will also refuse to believe in unconditioned values which would set themselves up athwart one's freedom like things. [*Renonçant à chercher hors de soi-même la garantie de son existence, il refusera aussi de croire à des valeurs inconditionnées qui se dresseraient comme des choses en travers de sa liberté*]¹⁵

What she describes here will be exemplified in her later interpretation of Sade, whom she presents as refusing to recognize a foreign absolute – being willing to act in a 'free defiance' [*un libre défi*] of contemporary morality, religion, and law."¹⁶ In this respect, she claims, he undergoes something like a Stoic conversion, though in both *Ethics of Ambiguity* and in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* Beauvoir had also distanced herself from what she thought of as Stoic forms of conversion:¹⁷

Are we back to the idea that one can only act in obedience to one's evil nature? Are we not destroying his freedom with the pretext of safeguarding his authenticity? No, for though freedom may be unable to go counter to given reality [*le donné*], it is able to wrest itself away from it and assume it. This procedure [*démarche*] is

¹⁵ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel, 1976), 14 (trans. mod); Beauvoir, *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté, suivi de Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (Paris: Gallimard [Folio essays], 2003), 20.

¹⁶ Beauvoir, "Faut-il brûler Sade?" in *Privileges* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 11–89, 76, translated as "open defiance" in Beauvoir, "Must We Burn Sade?" *The Marquis de Sade: An Essay by Simone de Beauvoir with Selections from his Writings Chosen By Paul Dinnage*, ed. and trans. Paul Dinnage (New York: New English Library, 1972), 9–61, 52. This is another piece in which Beauvoir mentions possibilities of conversion several times. Sade's hope was not to be converted [*il se soucie peu de se convertir*] but to be confirmed in his choice (see Beauvoir, "Faut-il brûler Sade?", 11–89, 71, translated as "he cared little about changing himself" in Beauvoir, "Must We Burn Sade?", 48. Discussing Sade's possible hopes of reforming society (47) and his desire to eradicate repressive laws, she comments: "*peut-être Sade a-t-il vraiment rêvé avec nostalgie à l'intime conversion qui provoquerait en lui celle des autres hommes*" ("Faut-il brûler Sade?", 70); "perhaps Sade truly dreamed with nostalgia of the intimate conversion that the conversion of other men would provoke in him" ("Must We Burn Sade?" 48, trans. mod). Beauvoir's essay was first published in *Les Temps Modernes*, December 1951–January 1952, and Beauvoir, with her account of Sade's ethic of authenticity (59), may well have in mind Sartre's account of the authenticity of Genet, first published in 1952. There are parallels between the works, as when Beauvoir comments, "one must *make oneself* a criminal [*il faut se faire criminel*] in order to avoid *being* evil [*d'être méchant*]" as is a volcano or a member of the police. It is not a matter of submitting to the universe, but of imitating it in free defiance" ("Must We Burn Sade," 52, trans. mod). But "Faut-il brûler Sade?" also provides several references to Blanchot's reading of Sade, which appeared in 1949. See Blanchot, *Lautréamont and Sade*, trans. Stuart and Michelle Kendall (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) and Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Pantheon, 1963). Sartre refers in his study to Genet's conversion; see for example 50, 150, and 449. In fact, Merleau-Ponty also affirms this particular concept of ethics in his essay on Beauvoir: "For the value is there. It consists of actively being what we are by chance" (Merleau-Ponty, "Metaphysics and the Novel," trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, in *Sense and Non-Sense* [Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964], 26–40, 40.

¹⁷ In *Ethics*, she is rejecting the form of "Stoic conversion" that would "oppose to the sensible universe a formal freedom which is without content" (Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity, Pour une morale*, 19); and see Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, 114, for her account of the Stoic conversion as "ineffective."

similar to Stoic conversion which, by deliberate decision, turns reality to its own account [*reprend à son compte la réalité*].¹⁸

Sade was, moreover, a figure who “made of his sexuality an ethic,”¹⁹ in a sense not disconnected from an early definition of ethics endorsed by Beauvoir: “Ethics is not an ensemble of constituted values and principles; it is the constituting movement through which values and principles are constituted.”²⁰ In *Pyrrhus*, she also distances herself at some length from what she, and Sartre before her, describe as “*la conversion heideggerienne*.”²¹ Here, she appears to be rejecting what she takes to be the Heideggerian account of being-toward-death.²² When, in the *Ethics* of

¹⁸ Beauvoir, “Must We Burn Sade?” 52, trans. mod.

¹⁹ Beauvoir, “Must We Burn Sade?” 12.

²⁰ Beauvoir, “Moral Idealism and Political Realism,” trans. Anne Deing Cordero, *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 175–93, 188. Notice that here she does not refer to the life arising as a consequence of this constituting movement as “ethical”; nor does she refer to the *constituted* movement; nor evidently is it the values and principles to which an individual may adhere. Locating “ethics” in their *constituting* movement, Beauvoir here renders “ethics” the near equivalent of the concept of ontological freedom she shares with Sartre.

²¹ Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, 114, and see *Being and Nothingness*, in which, as Beauvoir does, Sartre describes Heidegger’s account of “the inauthentic mode of the ‘they.’” He describes in this context how “the world refers to me a sort of impersonal reflection of my inauthentic possibilities in the form of instruments and complexes which belong to ‘everybody’ and which belong to me insofar as I am ‘everybody’: ready-made clothes, common means of transportation, parks, gardens, public places, shelters made for *anyone* who make take shelter there, etc.” Describing my thereby “making myself known [*me fais annoncer*] as anybody,” Sartre identifies this as “the inauthentic state” and it is Sartre who goes on to specify “which is my ordinary state in so far as I have not realized my conversion to authenticity [*réalisé la conversion à l’authenticité*]” (*Being and Nothingness*, 332; *L’Être et le néant*, 291).

²² It is hard to know exactly what Sartre and Beauvoir have in mind when they attribute to Heideggerian inauthenticity, with regards death and the “they,” the alternative possibility of conversion, as when Sartre proposes that for Heidegger an authentic relation to death is a form of personal conversion. Beauvoir was familiar with Henry Corbin’s French translation of sections from *Being and Time* first published in 1938, including the selections from *Being and Time* on being-toward-death, and on temporality and history, in which Corbin translated Heidegger’s *Dasein* as “human reality.” Like Sartre, Beauvoir used the term “*réalité humaine*,” translated by Barnes in the English translation of *Being and Nothingness* and Parshley in *The Second Sex* intermittently as “human reality.” Because of the use of the term, in addition to its inconsistent translation, the connection between what Beauvoir called *réalité humaine* and what she attributed to Heideggerian Being are likely obscured. Corbin translates *übernehmen*, which in English becomes “taking over” (thus: “Death is a possibility-of-Being which Dasein itself has to take over in every case”; see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson [London: Basil Blackwell, 1962], 294), as the verb “*assumer*,” to assume: “*La mort, c’est une possibilité de son être que chaque réalité-humaine respective doit assumer elle-même*” (*Qu’est-ce que la métaphysique ? par Martin Heidegger. Suivi d’extraits sur l’être et le temps et d’une conférence sur Hölderlin*, ed. Corbin [Paris: Gallimard, 1938], 140). While it is common to see “*assumer*” used in discussions of Heidegger in French contexts, in the work of Sartre and Beauvoir the verb lends itself to connotations of commitment probably most exemplified in Sartre’s *What Is Literature?*, and literature “*engagé*.” In an English context one might see “taking up” rather than “assuming.” Thus, see Robert Bernasconi discussing my being-toward-death as revealing my fundamental ownness (*Jemeinigkeit*) given that no one can die in my place: “what it might mean to take up one’s death in authentic being-toward-death in what could perhaps be described as

1947,²³ Beauvoir again took up the question of a conversion that could be associated with an existentialist ethics, she distances herself from an alternative attributed to the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, proposing instead, some kind of conversion (*plutôt que d'un dépassement hégélien, il s'agit ici d'une conversion*).²⁴ This time, Beauvoir envisages a human who assumes (*assume*) the inevitability with which she or he tends (*tendre*) toward a being one can never be. This is not identical with the kind of conversion that refuses

a dissolution of one's being lost in the 'they' of inauthenticity" (Bernasconi, "Whose Death is it Anyway? Philosophy and the Cultures of Death," *Tympanum* 4 [Khoraographies for Jacques Derrida on July 15, 2000], at <http://www.usc.edu/dept/comp-lit/tympanum/4/bernasconi.html>).

Describing Heideggerian conversion, Beauvoir may have in mind this dissolution of the state of being lost in the "they." See in this respect her claim in "Must We Burn Sade?" that "the mystified and mystifying society against which [Sade] rebels suggests Heidegger's 'the one' in which the authenticity of existence is swallowed up" (Beauvoir, "Must We Burn Sade?", 56). However, Sartrean and Beauvoirian inauthenticity is frequently associated with what Sartre vividly describes as *conduits* of bad faith. Notice that *Ethics of Ambiguity* does not mention the association between authenticity and being-toward-death, retaining the reference only to the former in the mention of Heideggerian "conversion." The implied view might be that a viable notion of authenticity could be abstracted from Heidegger's discussion of being-toward-death. On this issue see also *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, 114, and even the "Time, Activity, History" section of the 1970 work *La Vieillesse* *Old Age*:

"Therefore, one must not say, with Heidegger, that man's authentic project is being for death [*être pour mourir*, where "*Etre-pour-la-mort*" is the Corbin translation of "being-toward-death"]; that death is our essential end, that there is no other choice for man than the flight from or the assumption [*assomption*] of this ultimate possibility. According to Heidegger himself, there is no interium for men; his subjectivity is revealed only through an engagement in the objective world. There is choice only through an action that bites onto things [*mord sur choses*]. What man chooses is what he makes [*fait*]; what he projects [*projette*] is what he finds, but he does not make his death; he does not find it. He *is* mortal. And Heidegger has no right to say that this being is precisely *for* death. The fact of being is gratuitous; one is *for nothing* [*pour rien*] or rather, the word *for* makes no sense here [in German *zu*]. Being is project because it posits an end, says Heidegger. But as being, being posits no end; it is. The project alone is what defines its being as being *for*. Heidegger agrees that, unlike [*à la différence de*] other ends this supreme end is not defined as an end by any act. The resolute decision that throws man toward [*vers*] his death does not lead him to kill himself, but only to live in the *presence* of death. But what is presence? It is nowhere else but in the act that presences [*présentifier*]; it is realized only in the creation of concrete links [*la création des liens concrets*]. Thus the Heideggerian conversion is shown to be as ineffective as the Stoic conversion. After, as before, life continues [*se poursuit*], identical. It is only a matter of interior change. The same behaviours [*conduites*] that are inauthentic when they appear as flights become authentic if they take place [*se déroulent*] in the face of death. But this phrase 'in the face of' [*en face de*] is only a phrase. In any case, while I am living, death is not *here*, and in whose eyes is my behaviour a flight if for me it is a free choice of an end? Heidegger's hesitations concerning the degree of reality of inauthentic existence have their source in this sophism. In truth, only the subject defines the meaning of his action. There is no flight except through [*par*] a project of flight. When I love; when I desire [*vieux*], I flee nothing: I love, I desire. The nothingness that anguish reveals to me is not the nothingness of my death. It is the negativity at the heart of my life that allows me to constantly transcend all transcendence. And the consciousness of this power is translated not by the assumption of my death, but rather by this 'irony' of which Kierkegaard or Nietzsche speaks. . . . Thus one is not *for* death [*pour mourir*]; one is, without reason, without end" (Beauvoir, *Old Age*, trans. Patrick O'Brian [Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1977], 114–5, trans. mod; *La Vieillesse* [Paris: Gallimard, 1970], 254–5).

²³ A first section was published in *Temps Modernes* in 1946; see Beauvoir, *Philosophical Writings*, 289–98.

²⁴ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel, 1976), 13; Beauvoir, *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté, suivi de Pyrrhus et Cineas* (Paris: Gallimard [Folio essays], 2003), 18.

to recognize foreign absolutes, or that “rebels against the ‘they’” in which the “authenticity of existence is swallowed up.”²⁵

She goes on to compare the conversion she has in mind (the word repeated three times) with the Husserlian reduction: “*La conversion existentialiste doit être rapprochée plutôt de la réduction husserlienne.*”²⁶ However, Beauvoir seemingly proposes the analogy in one respect only: it is a question of how best to attain a consciousness of one’s true state (*vraie condition*).²⁷ Some kind of “bracketing” is useful, and whereas phenomenology can suspend an interrogation of the status of worldly reality so as to examine meanings and their universal nature, an existentialist conversion might, by contrast, bracket one’s “will to be,” or “will to being” (*volonté d’être*): “Let man put his will to being ‘in parentheses’ and he will thereby be brought to the consciousness of his true condition. [(*Que l’homme «mette en parenthèses» sa volonté d’être, et le voilà ramené à la conscience de sa vraie condition.*)]”²⁸

Beauvoir is, on the one hand, reminding her reader that an existentialist analysis, at least such as she and Sartre share, doesn’t deny the existence of such entities as my “instincts, desires [*désirs*], plans [*projets*], and passions,”²⁹ but these are nonetheless considered objects, much like the ego, all “supported, neither more nor less than the others, by an original, ontological freedom.”³⁰ It is sometimes thought that Sartre and Beauvoir denied the existence of the ego or emotions, but instead the status of these is reconsidered. They are deemed objects of consciousness, rather than originators of consciousness or of the world. Beauvoir therefore proposes that we might better arrive at an understanding of the status of being – as she

²⁵ Beauvoir, “Must We Burn Sade?”, 56.

²⁶ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 19. One of the epigraphs for this chapter is Husserl’s reference in the *Crisis* to the phenomenological attitude as a kind of conversion, and see also Heinämaa’s comment that this idea also appears in *Ideas II*, with whose manuscript form Merleau-Ponty would have been familiar, but likely not Beauvoir. Nonetheless, the metaphors of conversion seem to her appropriate as a means of thinking about the Husserlian *epoché*. See Heinämaa, “From Decisions to Passions: Merleau-Ponty’s Interpretation of Husserl’s Reduction,” in *Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree (Dordrecht, Boston and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 143n; discussing Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Second Book*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht, London, and Boston: Kluwer, 1989). See Husserl’s comment: “I have pursued various ways . . . aimed at exploring . . . such a motivation as presses beyond the natural positivity of life and science and forces upon us, by displaying the necessity of the phenomenological reduction, a conversion [*Umstellung*] to the transcendental attitude,” 415–6.

²⁷ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 14; *Pour une morale*, 19.

²⁸ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 14; *Pour une morale*, 19.

²⁹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 14; *Pour une morale*, 19. We can add will to this list, see Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 583.

³⁰ See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 583.

sees it – if we “bracket” the existence and phenomena of all such objects – what some consider to be psychic agents or forces – so as to be confronted with what remains. But the passage also indicates that *volonté d'être* can be bracketed – not just the “will,” as we'd expect, but *volonté d'être*. This comment could be imagined as one of the many points of critical dialogue with Sartre that are barely spelled out by Beauvoir. Beauvoir's *volonté d'être* approximates Sartre's “desire-to-be” or desire-for-being.

Being and Nothingness offered an ontology of existence, an account of the being of existence. Depicting so-called bad faith, the work provides an account of how, on occasion, one prefers to act as if one is a pure freedom divorced from one's actions, embodiment, objecthood, or context (one denies one's “facticity”); just as on other occasions, one prefers to reduce oneself to one's actions, embodiment, objecthood, or context (denying that one is in relation to them, a freedom, and so a responsibility for them). The Sartrean account of these various behaviors (*conduits*) of bad faith (the denial of freedom or the denial of facticity) is supposedly confined to the realm of description: ontology, not ethics, as he had said. Yet he claims that the two aspects of our being (*facticity* and *transcendence*) “are and ought to be capable [*susceptible*] of a valid coordination [*coordination valable*].”³¹ This suggests, though the implication is more in the rhetorical tone than the stated conclusions, that his anecdotal accounts of bad faith in *Being and Nothingness* – an ambivalent woman on a date, a robotic waiter, a “champion of sincerity” – accomplish something less than this valid coordination, whereas the positive tone of Sartre's *Saint Genet* seems to suggest that such a coordination may have been approximated (“I decided to be what crime made of me’. Since he cannot escape fatality, he will be his own fatality . . . This conversion can be situated between the ages of ten and fifteen”³²).

Can Sartre validly derive an “ought” from his “is,” particularly given his own comment that “ontology itself cannot formulate ethical precepts [*prescriptions morales*]”?³³ Despite this stark claim, notice that he leaves his reader in little doubt about what ethics his ontology *would have* grounded, had it been able to do so. In other early work, he speaks often enough to – or from the standpoint of – that ethics, *as if* it has been grounded, though pausing on occasion to acknowledge that it can't be. Though we acknowledge that an ethics cannot be formulated, Sartre seems to suppose we are winking nonetheless at its right answer, and we see this in the commentary

³¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 98; *L'Être et le néant*, 92.

³² Sartre, *Saint Genet*, 49–50.

³³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 795.

at the end of *Being and Nothingness*, which implies that we do know what he means and that we can “glimpse” it.³⁴ “Ontology . . . is concerned solely with what is, and we cannot possibly derive imperatives from ontology’s indicatives. It does, however, allow us to catch a glimpse [*elle laisse entrevoir cependant*] of what sort of ethics will assume its responsibilities when confronted with a *human reality in situation*.”³⁵

It is not surprising, given Sartre’s sly glimpsing, that his 1946 works *Portrait of an Anti-Semite* and *Existentialism is a Humanism* do claim to be dealing with a morality of freedom,³⁶ and do unfavorably evaluate bad faith,³⁷ particularly when it happens, as it conveniently does in these cases, that bad faith is associated with anti-Semitism and quietism.³⁸

Sartre also foreshadows the possibility of an ethics when he asks whether freedom can take itself as a value, and whether it can will itself (*se vouloir*) as a value.³⁹ Ontologically, he has defined human existence as the “being-which-is-not-what-it-is and which-is-what-it-is-not.”⁴⁰ But he proposes some questions to this definition at the conclusion of the 1949 work. This is our state: can we assume this state as our ideal? Is this liveable, not only as a reality to which we are in that well-known expression condemned, but also as a value? Would such a freedom, affirmatively valued, “[s]ituate itself

³⁴ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 795.

³⁵ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 795. In French “*réalité humaine*” (*L’Être et le néant*, 690), which had been Corbin’s translation of Heideggerian “Being.”

³⁶ “Existentialism is a Humanism,” for example, on the one hand acknowledges, “One may object: ‘But why should [someone] not choose to deceive himself?’ I reply that it is not for me to judge him morally, but I define his self-deception as an error,” and along these lines Sartre has recourse to the view that “the attitude of strict consistency alone is that of good faith.” In the next sentence, however, Sartre does appear to refer to a morality of freedom, in addition to a matter of error and consistency: “Furthermore, I can pronounce a moral judgment. For I declare that freedom, in respect of concrete circumstances, can have no other end and aim but itself; and when once a man has seen that values depend upon himself, in that state of forsakenness he can will only one thing, and that is freedom as the foundation of all values. That does not mean that he wills it in the abstract: it simply means that the actions of men of good faith have, as their ultimate significance, the quest of freedom itself as such” (Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” in *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*, ed. Stephen Priest [London: Routledge, 2001], 25–57, 42–3).

³⁷ In addition to the above comments from “Existentialism is a Humanism,” see *Anti-Semite and Jew*, in which, although he describes as inauthentic the Jew who attempts to deny his or her situation (see Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker [New York: Schocken, 1948], 91), he qualifies that of course “the term ‘inauthentic’ implies no moral blame” (93) and more powerfully discusses inauthenticity in the context of anti-Semitism: “Authentic liberty assumes responsibilities, and the liberty of the anti-Semite comes from the fact that he escapes all of his” (Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 32, and see the discussion of anti-Semitism as a chosen hatred and criminality, 7–34, 50, 53).

³⁸ For anti-Semitism see note 37; for quietism, “Does that mean that I should abandon myself to quietism? No. First I ought to commit myself and then act my commitment,” see Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” 36.

³⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 798; *L’Être et le néant*, 692.

⁴⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 798; *L’Être et le néant*, 692.

so much the more precisely . . . as it projects itself further in anguish as a conditioned freedom [*liberté en condition*] and accept [*revendiquera*] more fully its responsibility as an existent by whom the world comes into being [*vient à l'être*]"?⁴¹

Sartre has defined us, via an ontological description – as free. We are free irrespective of what we will. Freedom may therefore be irrecusable, but this does not mean that we fully *will* to be free.⁴² Questions concerning how we would live if we *willed* the Sartrean freedom are those that, he stresses are beyond his scope, and in the famous last two sentences of the work, "can find their reply only on the ethical plane [*le terrain moral*]. We shall devote to them a future work."⁴³

SARTREAN CONVERSIONS

In Sartre's work, the term "conversion" straddles both a way of being that seems relatively possible, and one that does not. In *Being and Nothingness*, it connotes a largely mysterious solution to a problem Sartre postpones. In the *Notebooks*, it is the symptom of what proved to be an unrealized work. In *Saint Genet*, however, brief as the references are, the term "conversion" connotes possibility. Genet is the consummate converter (of the language of salvation, miracles, election, grace, flowers, degradation, excretion, and of "downfall" into "triumph," as Sartre figures it⁴⁴), and Sartre also offers a reading in which Genet's style of conversion is rather like that which Beauvoir will attribute to Sade: it is one in which criminality is converted from a vilification and an objectification imposed on Genet, to his converting assumption of that by which he is vilified to states of passion and "miracle." Sartre stresses that such a conversion does not occur in a moment, nor by a moment of conscious volition: "at no moment was a decision made to achieve this conversion."⁴⁵

Genet's freedom is expressed in his strategies of assumption, amplification, and intensification ("very well, he will intensify the quarantine"⁴⁶), nonreflective strategies that are indications, in Sartre's work,

⁴¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 798; *L'Être et le néant*, 692.

⁴² On the other hand, he argues in *Existentialism is a Humanism* that "will to freedom . . . is implied in freedom itself" (Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 25–57, 43).

⁴³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 798. ⁴⁴ Sartre, *Saint Genet*, 447.

⁴⁵ Sartre, *Saint Genet*, 449.

⁴⁶ Sartre, *Saint Genet*, 448. Perhaps this depiction of Genet can be compared with Sartre's depiction of he who "thinks of himself as a Jew because the anti-Semite has put him in the situation of a Jew." Sartre's depiction is considered a version of authenticity insofar as it is a form of "access to consciousness." In that case, Sartre is considering parallels between class and race consciousness, in other words, consciousness of the production of racism as situation. There is nonetheless a parallel

of a possible conversion, and also a good illustration of the disconnect between this form of conversion and some kind of reflective or deliberate decision. But it will be recalled that there had been two references to the term “conversion” in *Being and Nothingness*, one of which associates Heideggerian authenticity with a conversion from inauthenticity,⁴⁷ and another that relates to our modalities of hate, and to the kind of radical conversion these might require.⁴⁸

Notice the difference in Sartre’s work between these kinds of conversion. Genet’s conversion is possible, while the conversion of our concrete relations to others will prove close to impossible, because it will clash with Sartre’s ontology. One is a reality, the other envisages an almost indescribable, radical change. Both visions indicate that ethics are a tension point for Sartre. On the one hand, if every conscious human subject can be supposed to have acted in ontological freedom, where, as has often been asked, is the place for ethics, particularly an ethics that privileges the affirmation of freedom? Humans are free, on this view, whether freedom is affirmed or not. Sartre repeatedly stressed the importance of the valuation of freedom, and attempted to derive this importance from the ontological definition of freedom, but the attempt to derive the one from the other is usually judged unsuccessful.⁴⁹ One kind of conversion (producing a

between these different accounts of the production of the situation of stigma and vilification, and of an assumption of that situation. The latter is valued by Sartre and attributed both to Genet’s revaluing amplification and to what in *Anti-Semite and Jew* is described as class-consciousness and a consciousness of a situation of racial violence. Compare to Beauvoir’s strategy in *The Second Sex* with respect to women and consciousness versus mystification. Sartre’s account of revaluing amplification by Genet is not paralleled in Beauvoir’s discussion of women (Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 150).

⁴⁷ Again, the one reference occurs where Sartre discusses how “the world refers to me a sort of impersonal reflection of my inauthentic possibilities in the form of instruments and complexes which belong to ‘everybody’ and which belong to me insofar as I am ‘everybody’: ready-made clothes, common means of transportation, parks, gardens, public places, shelters made for *anyone* who make take shelter there, etc.” Describing my thereby “making myself known [*me fais annoncer*] as anybody,” Sartre identifies this as “the inauthentic state,” going on to specify “which is my ordinary state in so far as I have not realized my conversion to authenticity [*réalisé la conversion à l’authenticité*]” (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 332; *L’Être et le néant*, 291).

⁴⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 534n; *L’Être et le néant*, 463.

⁴⁹ “Existentialism is a Humanism” offers a variety of ruses for generating an ethics affecting the plurality of humans based in an ethics of freedom, but is unsatisfactory from this perspective. For example, Sartre claims, “When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men,” 29. Thus, Sartre’s intention to find a more “other-oriented” implication of our choices, and locate alternatives for the apparent individualism of his ethics, is clear. However, how can a non-individualist ethics be justified? Sartre proposes several options. For example, he suggests, “To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen,” 29. If “we will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for the entire epoch in which we find

subject whose freedom is affirmed, or who wills his or her freedom) seems in either case redundant. On the other hand, the radical conversion of which Sartre speaks in his chapter “Concrete Relations with Others [*Les relations concrètes avec autrui*]” that might somehow involve a modification of such fundamental behavior as hatred or indifference is a different matter. Where the first conversion barely seems the stuff of ethics, the second barely seems sufficiently realizable.

SARTRE AND THE DESIRE-FOR-BEING

Arguing that human existents are founded in their lack of foundedness, their lack of being, their incompleteness, or fissure, or nothingness at the heart of being, Sartre connects this condition with an existential tendency to appropriation and possession, of objects or of people reduced to objects – the constant attempt to fill up the gap. Neither Sartre nor Beauvoir considered that this lack, fissure, or gap at the heart of humans could be overcome, eradicated, or “filled,” and Beauvoir associates this question with the status of ethical conversion. No matter how ethics was to be defined, no matter what one might hope from a conversion, such hopes and ideals could never modify our fundamental ontological structure. So, for example, in response to the visions Beauvoir attributes to Hegel, Marx, Comte,

ourselves. Our responsibility is thus much greater than we had supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole,” 29. The connection here is between the unjustified assertion that one cannot will except by willing what one wills as a value, and the second unjustified assertion that to will something as a value must be to will it as a value for all. The second ruse appears to be in part inspired by Kant, though evidently Sartre is otherwise distancing himself from Kantian ethics. Nonetheless, he takes the following to be a useful if not vital interrogation: “But in truth, one ought always to ask oneself what would happen if everyone did as one is doing; nor can one escape from that disturbing thought except by a kind of self-deception,” 30. Here, the suggestion appears to be both that when we implicitly choose, we ought also to explicitly evaluate the implicit choice through the explicit interrogation of whether we could make a universal maxim of our choice. “The man who lies in self-excuse, by saying ‘Everyone will not do it’ must be ill at ease in his conscience, for the act of lying implies the universal value which it denies,” 30. A further suggestion seems to be that at some indirect level, such a universalizing project must have been at work. Can I have implicitly chosen except by having either acted in accordance with a universalizable maxim (so to speak), or, having acted in some way that would refuse similar actions for all? This would be judged flight, inauthenticity, self-deception. Sartre similarly claims that “I am obliged to will the liberty of others at the same time as my own. I cannot make liberty my aim unless I make that of others equally my aim,” 43. The view that our own freedom somehow assumes a commitment to a community in terms of which I act and an affirmation of the parallel freedom of others – since to value my freedom must (except in bad faith) imply my valuation of freedom for all – leads to impressive-sounding statements: “*Pas un Français ne sera libre tant que les Juifs ne jouiront pas de la plénitude de leurs droits*” (Sartre, *Réflexions sur la question juive* [Paris: Paul Morihien, 1946], 198); “None of the French will be free so long as Jews do not enjoy the fullness of their rights” (Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 153, trans. mod.).

and others of an eventual “immobility of being,” a “unity of the World or finished Socialist state” where the “Future appears as both the infinite and as Totality . . . conciliation . . . the abolition of the negative . . . fullness, happiness,”⁵⁰ Beauvoir responds:

but this dream is not permitted [*ce rêve n'est pas permis*] since man is originally negativity. No social upheaval, no moral conversion [*conversion morale*] can eliminate this lack [*ce manque*] which is in his heart [*en son coeur*]; it is by making himself a lack of being [*manque d'être*] that man exists, and positive existence is this lack assumed [*assumé*] but not eliminated [*aboli*].⁵¹

Thus, Beauvoir and Sartre agree on the definition of humans in terms of *manque d'être*, and at least for Sartre this is unavoidable since he equates freedom with this lack: “What we have expressed . . . in terms of lack can be just as well expressed in terms of *freedom*. The for-itself chooses because it is lack; freedom is really synonymous with lack.”⁵² That is one fundamental equation and he attaches a second that will be vital for the possibility and limitations of his ethics. Sartre associates this ontological lack with a “desire,” the desire for plenitude of being. He claims that we strive to be full, positive, and present, to have the fixity of objects, to be, as he says, an impossible entity, a “for-itself-in-itself,” also famously described by Sartre as our striving to be like God.⁵³ Sartre equates this desire with our lack of being and desire for the self-identical being we lack, again claiming that these are *equivalent*:

The for-itself is defined ontologically as a *lack of being* [*manque d'être*] . . . Fundamentally man is the *desire to be* [*désir d'être*] and the existence of this desire is not to be established by an empirical induction; it is the result of an *a priori* description of the being of the for-itself, since desire is a lack [*désir est manque*] and since the for-itself is the being which is to itself its own lack of being.⁵⁴

This lack/desire, and striving may take limitless forms, but it is presented by Sartre as constitutive and original. While it is an ontological, not an empirical, sociological, or psychological claim, it is associated with human behaviors such as appropriation and possession, in addition to hate and sadism. Desiring to be “full,” rather than lacking, the world and others

⁵⁰ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 116.

⁵¹ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 118; *Pour une morale*, 146, trans. mod.

⁵² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 722.

⁵³ “Desire is a lack of being. As such it is directly supported by the being of which it is a lack. This being, as we have said, is the in-itself-for-itself, consciousness become substance, consciousness become the cause of itself, the Man-God” (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 735).

⁵⁴ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 722; *L'Être et le néant*, 624–5.

present to us as different variations on possibilities for being full. If I *am* constitutively lack and desire-not-to-be-lack, my project is to try to appropriate another in some way to appease my lack. This is, inevitably, a futile endeavor.

Evidently, much human behavior can be analyzed as an expression of appropriative and possessive tendencies, and while Sartre does discuss such tendencies, he is clear that his claim is *a priori*, not anthropological. One result of his considering our appropriative tendencies as the equivalent of our ontology, is that, as Mark Poster notes, “bourgeois, acquisitive man becomes Man as such.”⁵⁵ Poster’s criticism is persuasive when we consider Sartre’s descriptions of our appropriative relationship to the world: “If I desire this picture, it means that I desire to buy it, to appropriate it for myself.”⁵⁶ Even when Sartre is imagining “the future existence of a more just collective organisation, where individual possession will cease to be protected and sanctified,” he explains that “this does not mean that the appropriative tie will cease to exist.”⁵⁷

As Poster comments, given that being becomes almost indistinguishable from the desire to have, an ontological definition supersedes a historical account of modes of acquisitive tendencies. Moreover, what if the appropriative relationship to things and people poses a problem from an ethical perspective? Then a different theoretical orientation might be needed, which could accommodate or somehow constitute a possible alternative to what Sartre takes to be constitutive of human existence. But the starting position of the ontology left little room to move, given the proposal that lack=desire=appropriateness. This almost shut the door in advance to criticisms of appropriateness. Moreover, Sartre associated a considerable amount of the behavior that might, from an ethical perspective, seem particularly questionable (hatred, indifference, rivalry, hostility) with his ontology. If rivalry with the other, or the wish to dominate the other, were synonymous with Being, an ethical assessment of this behavior might seem irrelevant, an impression consolidated by Sartre’s comment that possessiveness and appropriateness would persist with us in all circumstances

⁵⁵ Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 101. As he writes, “Sartre erased the specificity and historicity of freedom, universalizing it as a natural aspect of the human condition,” 83. Lundgren-Gothlin and Ursula Tidd make almost the same criticism of Beauvoir; see Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*, and Ursula Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir: Gender and Testimony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁵⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 736.

⁵⁷ He explains that it could remain “by virtue of a *private* relation of men to things” (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 749).

and societies. Also, Sartre associates this desire for impossible being with the fact that “conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others.”⁵⁸ If we desire to retain possession of, and centrality in, our experienced universe, to be confronted with a competing perspective is fundamentally threatening, even in cases where such perspectives seem benign or gratifying.⁵⁹

Arguing that I am lack, striving (impossibly) to be fixed and filled, Sartre had argued that the eruption of another human being in my lived world constitutes conflict: it destabilizes my position as subjective center of perception and experience with the advent of a competing center emanating from a foreign other. But if I confront another not as a competing subject, but as an object, as part of the field of objects in the world I perceive and experience, the experience seems more consistent with my subjective stance, rather than threatening its disruption. In this respect, it is more desirable to look out at a world, including a world of others, and perceive or evaluate it and them, while it is a potential or real threat to fear or find one is evaluated or scrutinized by, or subjected to, others. Accordingly, Sartre’s 1943 work depicts a relatively paranoid world, for which shame is emblematic of what it is to encounter the other, an encounter that bifurcates into the stylized competing outcomes of being objectified by the other, or objectifying the other. It is in terms of these bifurcated alternatives that, according to Sartre, desire, love, hatred, and indifference may all be interpreted. All are inherently ruses doomed to become, through the appropriation of another, that impossible entity, a for-itself-in-itself.

Lack equals desire, and while Sartre does not quite claim that lack=desire=conflict, he does offer an amount claiming that conflict is the meaning of being-for-others. We have seen that, in *Being and Nothingness*, he introduces the question of a conversion in the context of his discussion of conflicting relations with the other, amid the treatment of hatred. Yet his ontology deems these conflicts near inevitable. Apart from his obvious exclusion of ethics committed to universal or fixed values, it becomes clear how broad is the field of ethical formulations excluded by his work – with these resources, for example, there is little ground to condemn hatred or rivalry. What ethics could his early work support? His *Cahiers pour une morale* would see him grappling with the question.

⁵⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 475.

⁵⁹ Thus, even of the pride another might take in me (which may seem gratifying, not alienating, as in the case of shame), Sartre reminds that it is a fragile perspective from an other whom I do not control, from whom I am divided, and which can easily be withdrawn or undermined.

SARTREAN CONVERSIONS

It is the term “conversion,” and not the emphasis on a morality of freedom grounding *Anti-Semite and Jew* and *Existentialism is a Humanism*, that appears repeatedly, some twenty-seven times, in the *Notebooks for an Ethics*.⁶⁰ Although these notebooks make scant mention of Beauvoir,⁶¹ the themes of the notebooks bring Sartre into an implicit conversation with her interests, particularly as her *Ethics of Ambiguity* was published between 1946 and 1947,⁶² just as the Sartrean notebooks were being produced.

Conversion is first used in the notebooks as a means to reconsider the positions presented in *Being and Nothingness*, when, in notes written around 1947–48, he concludes that the earlier work “was not trying to describe our essential nature or [the] necessary structure of all human relations but just unconverted ones.”⁶³ Thus, although “sadism and masochism are the revelation of the Other,” “the struggle of consciousness only makes sense before conversion.”⁶⁴ Renouncing a critical element of *Being and Nothingness* he repudiates his earlier account of humans as locked, by the nature of their being, into inevitable conflict with each other, with the declaration, “there is no ontological reason to stay on the level of struggle.”⁶⁵ He also attaches to the revised view that humans are not inherently antagonistic to each other’s aims the possibility of transcending oppression, in addition to the possibility of founding an ethics, and “transforming the hell of human passions described in *Being and Nothingness*.”⁶⁶ Anderson has suggested that for the Sartre of this period, conversion would remove our attempts at domination and conflict because the converted individual would renounce the attempt to be in total control of his or her own being.⁶⁷ Yet, although there are promising comments such as “in the absence of historical change, there is no absolute moral conversion,”⁶⁸ as Eva Lundgren-Gothlin notes, at this point conversion still seems to be an individual matter for Sartre.

⁶⁰ *Ethics of Ambiguity* contains fourteen references to conversion.

⁶¹ See the one mention in Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 419. In fact, one would have to turn to Sartre’s colleague Merleau-Ponty for a more frequent mention of Beauvoir’s writings. See Merleau-Ponty, “Metaphysics and the Novel,” 26–40; and Merleau-Ponty, *Psychologie et pédagogie de l’enfant. Cours de Sorbonne 1949–1952* (Paris: Verdier, 2001), 87, 105, 498.

⁶² Extracts are published in *Les temps modernes* between 1946 and 1947, before it appears in full in 1947.

⁶³ Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 65.

⁶⁴ Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 20.

⁶⁵ Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 20.

⁶⁶ Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 9, 499, 20.

⁶⁷ Thomas C. Anderson, *Sartre’s Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 1993), 65.

⁶⁸ Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 9.

There appears to be no consideration of the social, historical, or material conditions necessary.⁶⁹

It is evident, also, that Sartre does not relinquish his definition of human being as lack or nothingness.⁷⁰ Instead, what appears to undergo some kind of revision is the equation of that lack with the desire for plenitude. Yet this is no definitional reconsideration. Sartre had considered lack and desire synonymous, and in the *Notebooks* the question is not to accomplish their semantic differentiation, but some kind of subjective transformation – envisaged but not addressed by Sartre – allowing lack-of-being a different life (less appropriative or subordinating) as desire-for-being. Clearly the *Notebooks* would have been obliged to reconsider the inherent intertwining of lack and desire, yet Sartre is instead focused on the prospect of some kind of radical subjective transformation, an ethical accomplishment.

BEAUVOIR'S CONVERSIONS

While the term “conversion” was proliferating beyond twenty echoes throughout Sartre’s *Notebooks*, it chimes fourteen times throughout Beauvoir’s *Ethics*. Let’s return to Beauvoir’s suggestion that there might be useful exercise, a parallel to Husserl’s *epoché* (“Let man put his will to being [*sa volonté d’être*] ‘in parentheses’ and he will thereby be brought to the

⁶⁹ See Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*, 151, and note that for this particular change, one would turn most obviously to Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. The *Notebooks* modify the rejection of the ideal of reciprocity in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre extensively discusses conversion and evokes the ideal of generosity: “within this hell there is already generosity and creation. For in springing up within the world I give other For-itselfs a new dimension of being.” He continues, consistent with the ethics elsewhere presented by Beauvoir, “And this is in no way a fall or a threat. . . . This comes about only if the other refuses to see a freedom in me *too*” (Sartre, *Notebooks*, 500). He affirms that a collective and mutually recognizing freedom is possible, and argues that “one cannot be converted alone. Ethics is not possible unless everyone is ethical” (*Notebooks*, 9). Those elements that seem unchanged from *Being and Nothingness* include the depiction of sexual relations as consistent with the view of fundamentally appropriative and conflictual relations. Despite it having been (if Beauvoir is to be believed) Sartre who encouraged Beauvoir to write about women’s situation, and despite the remark by Sartre that again parallels the position presented in *The Second Sex* (“loving here signifies something wholly other than the desire to appropriate. . . . here too, in pure generosity, I assume myself as losing myself so that the fragility and finitude of the Other exist,” 507), some of Sartre’s material on women and sex in the *Notebooks* is even more objectionable than that of *Being and Nothingness*, including two discussions of rape. One describes it as a not uncommon “desire for a passing woman that would like immediate satisfaction without having to pass through all the intermediary steps of coquetry and seduction,” 427, while the other includes an extended, comprehending, and banalizing discussion of rape at 179–83, which also reiterates and exaggerates the depiction of desire offered in *Being and Nothingness*, here describing sexual desire as a mutual violence, 180.

⁷⁰ The definition is apparent even in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

consciousness of his true condition.”⁷¹), in asking what would survive the existentialist “conversion” that she likens to the Husserlian reduction. What might be the significance of Beauvoir’s suggestion that *volonté d’être*, the “will-to-being,” particularly as an approximation of Sartre’s “desire-to-be” or desire-for-being, could be “bracketed”? She might have assumed the early Sartre’s disagreement with the suggestion. We could not bracket lack, and since Sartre assumes the equivalency of lack and desire, we presumably could not bracket this fundamental modality: desire-to-be. Beauvoir’s use of this terminology is engaged, even enthusiastic, yet modificatory. She accepts the view of humans as an original lack, but not as the kind of original desire-to-be which is equated in Sartre’s early work with the desire to appropriate, possess, and compete with the other. If she dissociates these, she may have more opportunity than the early Sartre to establish an ethics that called into question these modalities, as they will not be similarly original. If so, however, she must widen what is to count as ethics well beyond that which “constitutes freedom.”

Yet we saw that Beauvoir agrees we are an original lack, constantly striving, fruitlessly but ineluctably, toward an impossibility: to have an unambiguous existence. Every human existent, she comments in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, “is not granted [*il ne lui est pas permis*] to exist without stretching [*sans tendre*] towards this being [*être*] which one will never be [*qu’il ne sera jamais*].”⁷² In this she agrees with Sartre: there is no human existence without a useless “stretching” toward the impossible: to be both humans and self-coinciding beings.

But one difference from the early Sartre – although if she understands her position to be one of disagreement she does not say so – is that Beauvoir does not *equate* lack-of-being with the desire-to-be of appropriation and conflict.⁷³ She certainly won’t dispute Sartre’s account of appropriative and conflicting behavior as thoroughly typical of humans, and she describes desire-for-being as arising from lack. But for Sartre, as lack/desire

⁷¹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 14; *Pour une morale*, 19.

⁷² Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 13, trans. mod. Note that she agrees also with Sartre’s proposal that in this stretching, there is a wish we could be like a god (a permanent, fixed, unmodifying, temporally static, self-present, conscious being): “man, in his vain attempt to *be* God, makes himself *exist* as man,” 13–4.

⁷³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 722. In an important reconfiguration of feminist understandings of Beauvoir’s relation to Hegel, Nancy Bauer also holds that Beauvoir does not consider desire-for-being to be original, and disagrees that it is to be equated with lack or original being. Thus, for example, Bauer argues that Sartre takes narcissism to be inevitable whereas Beauvoir would have it that the “moral moment” involves “the relinquishing of a certain form of narcissism in favor of risking an uncertain, unfixed, ambiguous relationship with the other” (Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophy and Feminism* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2001], 93).

we *are* appropriative in relation to the world. For Beauvoir, it seems we are *likely* to be so, but this opens up a far wider field of possibilities, leaving greater room for “conversion” as well as for a definition of what she names in *The Second Sex* as the “highest human achievement.”⁷⁴ The result is an additional sense of conversion in the context of her work: it is more possible than is posited in the 1943 Sartrean account that our tendencies toward possessiveness could be converted – though never definitively, and only with constant struggle. This is the important interpretation proposed by Nancy Bauer as a means of understanding the different relations to Hegel identifiable in Sartre and Beauvoir.⁷⁵ Moreover, there is an alternative, one identified by Gail Weiss, arising from Beauvoir’s agreement that lack-of-being is original and her apparent disagreement that lack-of-being is ontologically synonymous with appropriative desire-for-being. Beauvoir associates an original lack-of-being with the striving to *reveal* being. Weiss argues⁷⁶ that *Ethics of Ambiguity* can be interpreted as distinguishing between “desire-to-be” and “desire to reveal being.” Beauvoir does not present the latter as the equivalent of striving to possess and objectify. Furthermore, unlike *volonté-à-être*, desire to *reveal* being⁷⁷ seems to survive the “reduction” Beauvoir mentions, and it similarly seems that she takes it to be original.

Moreover, we have seen that in *Notebooks for an Ethics*, Sartre revises his view, claiming that there is no ontological reason to remain on the level of struggle and that the struggle of consciousness “only makes sense before conversion.”⁷⁸ Thus he appears to have attempted in this period to pursue a view Bauer has attributed to Beauvoir, that master-slave like struggle should be considered secondary, not original. It is not a modality of original desire, but rather the indication of our ethical failure with respect to our original lack and desire to disclose. On this view, the appropriative treatment of women described in *The Second Sex* would reflect an ethical failure in personal and political relations between them.

⁷⁴ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US140; UK172. See also her account – mentioned in the context of her discussion of psychoanalysis – of the child’s original anxiety in the face of being, in relation to which the appropriative relationship to the world seems to be presented by Beauvoir as a response. Again, original lack is presented as *leading to*, but *not the equivalent of*, appropriativeness (and alienation in things), *Le deuxième sexe* I88–9; US47–8; UK79.

⁷⁵ Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 187, 229.

⁷⁶ Gail Weiss, “Introduction to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*,” in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons, 285.

⁷⁷ That we are beings who constantly reveal being is not disputed by the early Sartre; nonetheless, his interest in our constantly “revealing” meaning and being does not undermine his confidence, as seen in *Being and Nothingness*, that the appropriative relation to the world is original.

⁷⁸ Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 20.

HISTORY AND ETHICS

In Sartre's work, because the formal hostility of relations between subject and other had been grounded in the earliest formulations of his ontology, hostility and rivalry were not presented as historical formations, leading to the ahistorical depictions of humans. What then of Beauvoir?⁷⁹ From the outset she refers positively to, yet does not indicate a founding preoccupation with, this ontology. Moreover, the relations between the sexes presented in *Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex* are presented as historical formations. Taking the ontology as his starting position, Sartre confronted the problem of how to move out toward an ethics, a problem that almost seems to have haunted him. Beauvoir began more directly with her ethical preoccupations.⁸⁰ Because ethics was her priority, when she also appeals to some elements of an ontology shared with Sartre (such as the account of original lack, and its equation with desire-to-be), the problems of reconciling the ethics with the cited ontology are more inclined to indicate something amiss with the latter.⁸¹

Beauvoir envisages humans who might affirm, rather than attempt to fill or overcome, the tension of ambiguous existence: "But it is possible for one to want this tension even with the failure which it involves [*mais il lui est possible de vouloir cette tension même avec l'échec qu'elle comporte*]." ⁸²

In lieu of asking, in the *Ethics*, how this radically transformed relation to the tension of ambiguous existence might be achieved, she asks what the implications would be of desiring rather than struggling against our ambiguity.⁸³ Could we desire our own lack, or desire or will [*vouloir*] the tension of our own existence? It would amount to a fundamental transformation of the human condition, whose possibility is critical to the establishment of her ethics.⁸⁴ This produces a vital step evident in *The*

⁷⁹ One of the changes in Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* related to an incorporation of anthropology and ethnography, and in preparing the work she had consulted, prior to its publication, the manuscript of Lévi-Strauss's *Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Her extensive references to this work in the section on history, p. 113–133 of the first volume of *Le deuxième sexe*, are among the deletions in the abridged and altered English translation.

⁸⁰ See *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, "Moral Idealism and Political Realism," and *The Blood of Others*.

⁸¹ In particular, Sartre's association of the ontology with desire for appropriation could look amiss. This is just one of the reasons that Le Doeuff has been able to argue plausibly that Beauvoir's work operates as an indirect "staging" of the failure of Sartre's ontology in its apparently blithe and confident appeals to the latter.

⁸² Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 13, trans. mod; Beauvoir, *Pour un morale*, 18.

⁸³ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 14.

⁸⁴ Fredrika Scarth argues for an interpretation that modulates this idea, somewhat. "*Vouloir tension*" eventually becomes, on her reading, an ideal of ethical maturity attributed to Beauvoir, in which we might accomplish our "acceptance of our failure to impose our own meaning on the world to the

Second Sex, where the term “conversion” is used to refer affirmatively to a different, hypothetical relationship to freedom and alterity, and in this context she proposes a revision of the master-slave dialectic⁸⁵:

Each separate consciousness [*conscience*] aspires to set itself up alone as sovereign subject. Each tries to fulfill itself by reducing the other to slavery. But through work and fear, the slave comes to feel [*s'éprouve*] essential, also; and by a dialectical inversion, it is the master who appears as inessential. It is possible to rise above [*surmonté*] this conflict if each individual freely recognizes itself in the other [*par la libre reconnaissance de chaque individu en l'autre*], each positing itself and the other simultaneously as object and as subject in a reciprocal movement. But friendship and generosity, which realize concretely this recognition of freedoms [*libertés*], are not facile virtues; they are assuredly the highest human achievement [*de l'homme*], and through that achievement one finds one's truth [*sa vérité*]. But this truth is that of a struggle unceasingly begun, unceasingly abolished, it requires one [*l'homme*] to outdo oneself at every moment. Using another language, we could say that we attain an authentically moral attitude when we renounce *being* [*à être*] in order to assume our existence, through this conversion [*conversion*] also we renounce every kind of possession, for possession is one way of seeking being; but the conversion [*la conversion*] through which one attains real wisdom is never done [*faite*], it must be made [*faite*] incessantly, it demands a constant tension [*une constante tension*].

exclusion of others” (Scarth, *The Other Within*, 77). Perhaps Scarth's reading downplays Beauvoir's concurrent interest in an “impossibility” that might retain the idea of willing an ongoing tension, more than achieving acceptance. I cite below related material (to which Scarth also refers) in which Beauvoir mentions, with respect to such a conversion, “a struggle unceasingly begun, unceasingly abolished.”

⁸⁵ For Bauer's account of why, contrary to the common view, the master does not correlate with the man and the slave with the woman in *The Second Sex*, see Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 80. Bauer also notes that reciprocal recognition never transpires in Hegel's dialectic as presented in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. One subject is not acknowledged as subject by another subject, in the sense that Hegel's master “learns too late” (after the enslavement of the other) that the slave is needed for recognition; see Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 117. Lundgren-Gothlin argues that Beauvoir responded directly to Hegel and to Kojève, departing from Sartre's interpretation in many respects. Both she and Bauer agree that for Beauvoir the women/men relationship had to be distinguished from a master-slave dialectic. Beauvoir makes a point of demonstrating that women are not like Hegel's description of the slave: there is no inevitable process by which women depart from their enslaved position, for example through the transformation of nature through work. However, where Lundgren-Gothlin argues that the master-slave dialectic cannot, on Beauvoir's view, take place, because man's demand for recognition is not met by an equivalent demand from women (a struggle between them in which one of the parties might be willing to risk death not even taking place), Bauer responds that Beauvoir is more thoroughly transforming Hegel with an ideal according to which reciprocal recognition would involve a mutually equivalent position in which two subjects were willing to take up positions as both subjects and objects: “Hegelian reciprocity demands that beings mutually recognize one another as subjects. Indeed, . . . philosophers in Hegel's wake have disputed . . . whether and how our acknowledgement of each other as subjects is possible. But Beauvoir is to my knowledge wholly original in her figuring reciprocal recognition as requiring the acknowledgment of one's own and the other's essential nature as objects as well as subjects”; see Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*, 67, and Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 178, 186.

And so, unable to accomplish oneself [*s'accomplir*] in solitude, one [*l'homme*] is incessantly in danger in one's relations with one's fellows: one's life is a difficult enterprise with success never assured.⁸⁶

Though the "highest" human achievement is associated with the generosity of some variation on reciprocal recognition affirmative of its own constant tension and danger, the above passage makes clear that this could not be definitively realized. We might say that what could be realized, and only with great difficulty, is the kind of affirmation of ambiguity that was really an affirmation of the impossibility of the very affirmation. There could never be a definitive reconciliation with ambiguity. At best there could be the state of *vouloir* (rather than fleeing) *tension*, but Beauvoir does not downplay the instability and risk of that constant tension (and the willing of that state), for example, with respects between what one seeks from another and what it is possible to have. There could be no definitive resolution – in *this* sense, no *accomplished* conversion. Yet while, in a sense, Beauvoir affirms the impossibility of this ideal, she does suggest that to affirm impossibility may be distinguishable from attempting to escape it. Imagine that *vouloir tension* was a kind of affirmative ongoing negotiation with the *impossibility* of reciprocity – that this was, in fact, the best kind of reciprocity we could have.⁸⁷ At the least, Beauvoir suggests that such a

⁸⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US140; UK172. ("Chaque conscience prétend se poser seule comme sujet souverain. Chacune essaie de s'accomplir en réduisant l'autre en esclavage. Mais l'esclave dans le travail et la peur s'éprouve lui aussi comme essentiel et, par un retournement dialectique, c'est le maître qui apparaît comme l'inessentiel. Le drame peut être surmonté par la libre reconnaissance de chaque individu en l'autre, chacun posant à la fois soi et l'autre comme objet et comme sujet dans un mouvement réciproque. Mais l'amitié, la générosité, qui réalisent concrètement cette reconnaissance des libertés, ne sont pas des vertus faciles; elles sont assurément le plus haut accomplissement de l'homme, c'est par là qu'il se trouve dans sa vérité: mais cette vérité est celle d'une lutte sans cesse ébauchée, sans cesse abolie; elle exige que l'homme à chaque instant se surmonte. On peut dire aussi en un autre langage que l'homme atteint une attitude authentiquement morale quand il renonce à être pour assumer son existence; par cette conversion, il renonce aussi à toute possession, car la possession est un mode de recherche de l'être; mais la conversion par laquelle il atteint la véritable sagesse n'est jamais faite, il faut sans cesse la faire, elle réclame une constante tension. Si bien que, incapable de s'accomplir dans la solitude, l'homme dans ses rapports avec ses semblables est sans cesse en danger: sa vie est une entreprise difficile dont la réussite n'est jamais assurée" [Fr1231–2]).

⁸⁷ To be sure, Beauvoir saw much more potential in the idea of reciprocal recognition than did the early Sartre. Still, a dangerous, constant tension is a particular idea of reciprocity – and in that the participants can never be sure of it, it can never be definitively "reciprocal." My suggestion is that we should retain an appreciation of her interest in reciprocity, concurrent with an appreciation of the complexity she attributed to it. One formulation I have suggested is a reciprocity that takes place under the sign of its own impossibility. Given that Beauvoir comments both (to return again to these passages) that "it is not granted to exist without stretching [*tendre*] towards this being [*être*] which one will never be," and that "it is possible for us to want this tension even with the *failure* it involves" (my stress), we might conclude that Beauvoir's idea of conversion is interesting, given that it retains the idea that we cannot exist without striving to be unambiguous. Perhaps it is not exactly

mode, affirmative of tension, might offer alternatives to the worst of appropriation, narcissism, subjugation, and objectification, for example. In the above passage, Beauvoir stresses generosity and friendship in lieu of the stress on conflict presented by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*. In *The Second Sex*, she also focuses on alternative formulations of sex and love, which have a particular significance in the context of Sartre's presentation of sex and love as emblematic of struggle and conflict between humans.⁸⁸ But as Beauvoir emphasizes, these alternatives are part of a never-completed conversion of human desire from desire for plenitude to desire for ambiguity, in a possible affirmation of incompleteness, vulnerability, and incessant tension.⁸⁹ By contrast, even in the *Notebooks*, Sartre's references to conversion do not stress its inevitable risk, fragility, or (affirmative, negotiated) impossibility.⁹⁰ Instead, Sartre seems to be envisaging an achievable conversion, a moment of a more possible reformed humanity.⁹¹

Finally, a series of values appear to emerge within this discussion: generosity, risk, vulnerability, ambiguity, affirmation of tension. The material on generosity, friendship, love, and sex makes clear not only that they are to be favored over appropriation and conflict, but also that the latter are the "easier," yet from Beauvoir's perspective the less preferable response to original lack:

Authentic love [*l'amour authentique*] ought to be founded on the reciprocal recognition of two freedoms; each of the lovers would then experience themselves [*s'éprouverait*] both as self and as other [*comme soi-même et l'autre*]; neither would give up [*n'abdiquerait*] transcendence, neither would be mutilated; together they would disclose [*dévoilerait*] values and aims in the world. For the one and the

the ambiguity that we could hope to affirm, or not definitively – thus *that* conversion could not be accomplished. At best, we'd affirm the tension between affirming ambiguity and stretching against it? Conversion could relate, not to a different relation to ambiguity, exactly, but rather to impossibility. The conversion could relate to our affirmative, but certainly not resigned or reconciled, relationship to the impossibility of conversion.

⁸⁸ Sartre describes love as an attempt by the beloved to ensnare the other's gratifying consciousness, where desire is an attempt to seize a consciousness through sexual possession (*Being and Nothingness*, 477–90, 497–516; for alternative visions of what love and sexual desire ought to be see Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US667; UK677; FrII505; US401–2; UK422; FrII167–8; and for her discussion of this material see Debra Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997]).

⁸⁹ Thus it is unclear whether Beauvoir thinks reciprocal recognition can ever be "definitively" accomplished. Perhaps reciprocal recognition is an understandable reverie, at best a positive ideal, whose status calls on us to negotiate well with impossibility? Beauvoir's engagement with impossibility is probably one of the more underestimated elements of her work.

⁹⁰ Given Sartre's use of the term in the *Notebooks for an Ethics*, Lundgren-Gothlin indicates the possibility "that Beauvoir influenced Sartre in the realm of ethics" (*Sex and Existence*, 150).

⁹¹ The possibility of reciprocity is more extensively explored in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

other, love would be revelation of oneself [*de soi-même*] by the gift of self and the enrichment of the world.⁹²

Does this mean that Beauvoir has inserted an alternative appeal to an “abstract” or “external” ethical principle, where the early Sartre retains a maximal tightness between the ontology and the ethics? Beauvoir is aware of the problem involved in appealing to a universal ethics as if it is an external value, a found thing in the world that would be considered of intrinsic worth.⁹³ So, as she presents her ethics, it can be argued that she does so concurrent with a differently stressed ontology.

We’ve seen that Beauvoir does not associate our being an original lack with *inevitable* possessive and appropriative modes, but only with their likelihood. Like Sartre, she will also associate lack with disclosure of meaning in the world and the creation of value. But Sartre associates the disclosure of meaning with the possessive relation to the world, as when the world that I discover appears as mine.⁹⁴ Because Beauvoir distinguishes these, it is possible for her to propose alternative modes; therefore, original lack can be associated with fascination in the world and what is unexpected in it. A similar alternative is presented when Beauvoir discusses our relations with others. The other offers me not just the threat of destabilization of my world, but also the promise of newness, enrichment, foreignness, surprise, the gift of the unexpected.⁹⁵

⁹² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US667; UK677, trans. mod; FrII505; and for another reference to the value of generosity in the context of her discussions of *eros*, see *The Second Sex*, US424; UK444; FrII, 192.

⁹³ See, for example, early essays such as Beauvoir, “Moral Idealism and Political Realism,” 188.

⁹⁴ See for example, *Being and Nothingness*, 734ff and 765ff.

⁹⁵ Note that in her review of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, she distinguishes Sartre from Merleau-Ponty in terms of the way each distinguishes the for-itself and in-itself, with Sartre stressing the opposition of the in-itself and for-itself and “the nihilating power and the absolute freedom of the mind [*esprit*] in the face of being” (trans mod.) and writing of Merleau-Ponty: “one of the great merits of phenomenology is to have given back to man the right to an authentic existence, by eliminating the opposition of subject and the object. It is impossible to define an object by cutting it off from the subject through which and for which it is an object; and the subject reveals itself only through the objects in which it is engaged.” Indeed, she claims that only by taking this affirmation “as a basis will one succeed in building an ethics to which man can totally and sincerely adhere”; see Beauvoir, “Review of The Phenomenology of Perception,” in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons, 159–64, 163, 160. Commentators have stressed that Beauvoir, in offering an astute and enthusiastic review of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, distinguished Merleau-Ponty’s views from those of Sartre, seemingly in another instance of Beauvoir’s surreptitious differentiation from Sartre’s work. Heinämaa, in *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, makes a case for the unrecognized impact of Merleau-Ponty on Beauvoir’s work. See also Sonia Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence, Freedom, Subjectivity and Society* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), probably the first work to make the case that Beauvoir’s affiliations with Merleau-Ponty were stronger than with Sartre or other figures. Beauvoir’s greater interest in the subject’s engagement with the world as the context for disclosure of meaning, as compared to Sartre’s stress on appropriation and possession – a stress not seen in Merleau-Ponty – reinforces the suggestion that her affiliations are closer to the

Certainly, Beauvoir is not hostile to Sartre's account of the proximity of original lack, and the impetus to appropriateness, possessiveness toward the world, and conflict with the other. But on her version, these phenomena are very likely to arise from (though not the equivalent of) the ontological definition. Because of their likelihood, she describes the alternative (the friendship and generosity she evokes, the affirmation of risk and vulnerability, the reciprocal recognition) as our highest achievement (*le plus haut accomplissement*). But "highest achievement" could mean our most challenging option, not some greatest external value. Certainly, Beauvoir can more easily make a case that an ethics of risk and vulnerability is "hardest" (such a position accepts a certain amount of the perspective shared with Sartre to explain why it is so hard), than make the case that it is "better."

Given the recent valuation of the apparent "turn" to ethics in contemporary philosophers from Derrida to Butler,⁹⁶ it is not surprising that extensive attention in the recent secondary literature on Beauvoir has been directed to the importance of ethics in her work. Beauvoir's early commitment to ethics is considered characteristic, a positive departure from the early Sartre.⁹⁷ But in addition, the ethics are taken to be a positive aspect in her development, for often ethics themselves are taken, not just to be about the good, but to *be* a good, particularly when identifiable in philosophers otherwise considered relativist, pluralist, or nihilist, these often being used as scare words.

The philosophical consistency of the project has been interrogated. For example, it has been asked how Beauvoir's ethics can be reconciled with the ontology with which she appears to be sympathetic? And, if she rejects universal and external values, how can she justify the values of friendship, risk, or generosity? From the perspective of such questions, Maurice Blanchot's early essay on Beauvoir and Sartre is an important tonic in the Beauvoir literature, a bracing reminder that Beauvoir's philosophy may not be better insofar as it engages an ethics.

latter. The three aspects most indebted to Merleau-Ponty in *The Second Sex* are, Heinämaa suggests, his "descriptions of the living body, his notion of sexuality, and his understanding of the temporal nature of experience" (Heinämaa, "Introduction to Review of The Phenomenology of Perception," in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons, 153–8, 154).

⁹⁶ I do not think that either Derrida or Butler make a radical "turn" to ethics, but Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) has led to debate on this question amongst commentators. See Kathy Dow Magnus, "The Unaccountable Subject: Judith Butler and the Social Conditions of Intersubjective Agency," *Hypatia* 21(2): 81–102; and, for a discussion of whether an "ethical turn" should be identified in Derrida's work, and of the stakes of the debate, see Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

⁹⁷ Bergoffen's *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir* offers a powerful account of the importance of Beauvoir's ethics from this perspective.

THE DEPLORABLE SOLLEN

Blanchot's essay on the literature of Sartre and Beauvoir was first published in *L'Arche* in October 1945, and in December of that same year, Beauvoir gave the talk "Literature and Metaphysics."⁹⁸ Although she had made brief mention of ambiguity in 1944 in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, and in the 1945 essays,⁹⁹ her *Ethics of Ambiguity* appeared in 1947 after Blanchot's partially positive, partially critical response to the literature of Sartre and Beauvoir. Though "ambiguity" was a word Beauvoir associated with Sartre¹⁰⁰ and, others have suggested, with Hegel,¹⁰¹ Kierkegaard,¹⁰² and Merleau-Ponty,¹⁰³ the resonance of "ambiguity" for Blanchot, expressed in "The Novels of Sartre,"¹⁰⁴ was also significant for Beauvoir, and she

⁹⁸ First published in *Les temps modernes* in 1946 (1, 7), reprinted in Beauvoir, *L'existentialisme et la sagesse des nations* (Paris: Les Editions Nagel, 1948).

⁹⁹ See *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, trans. Marybeth Timmermann, *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons, 105, 99; and "Moral Idealism and Political Realism" (first published in November 1945 in *Les temps modernes* (1, 2), *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, 188.

¹⁰⁰ See for example, her explanation, "From the very beginning, existentialism defined itself as a philosophy of ambiguity. It was by affirming the irreducible character of ambiguity that Kierkegaard opposed himself to Hegel, and it is by ambiguity that, in our own generation, Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, fundamentally defined man . . . The failure described by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* is definitive, but it is also ambiguous" (Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 10–1). But Beauvoir also notes that the tradition of human being defined in terms of ambiguity is at least as long as Pascal's account of a human as a "thinking reed." See Beauvoir, "What is Existentialism?" in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons, 323–6, 325; and Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 7.

¹⁰¹ See Bauer on the ambiguity in Hegel's account of being both subject and object as *zweideutig*. Bauer refers explicitly to "the conception of ambiguity that Beauvoir inherits from Hegel," although she establishes the junction so as to better identify the ways in which Beauvoir then "domesticates" or "appropriates," and "genuinely reworks," this idea in Hegel (*Simone de Beauvoir*, 81).

¹⁰² Kierkegaard rejected in Hegel the resolution of contradictions into dialectical movement, and see in particular Heinämaa for her discussion of Kierkegaardian ambiguity as important to Beauvoir.

¹⁰³ See comments such as "I know myself only insofar as I am inherent in time and in the world, that is, I know myself only in my ambiguity" in Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 345. *The Phenomenology of Perception* was first published in 1945, and was reviewed by Beauvoir in that same year in *Les temps modernes* (1, 2), though Beauvoir does not, in her review, associate the term "ambiguity" with Merleau-Ponty. In March 1945, Merleau-Ponty published his commentary on Beauvoir's *L'Invitée* (*She Came to Stay*). This piece thematizes ambiguity as a means of conceiving life because "there is never any way to know the true meaning of what we do. Indeed, perhaps our actions have no *single* true meaning" (34). He also presents ambiguity as a means of conceiving the way that "consciousness escapes into the world." Giving itself the task of formulating this experience, "philosophical expression assumes the same ambiguities as literary expression," (28) to convey the idea that there is no stable, final, or singular truth to feelings and intentions (32, 40); see Merleau-Ponty, "Metaphysics and the Novel," 26–40 (first published in *Les Cahiers du sud* 270 [March 1945]).

¹⁰⁴ Blanchot, "The Novels of Sartre," in *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 191–207 (first published as "Les romans de Sartre," *L'Arche* 10 [October 1945]: 121–34, and reprinted in *La part du feu* [Paris: Gallimard, 1949], 188–203). Blanchot's "Literature and the Right to Death," published after Beauvoir's "Literature and Metaphysics," adds usefully to

seems to have responded closely to Blanchot's essay in "Literature and Metaphysics."¹⁰⁵

In his essay, Blanchot opposes those literary works in which characters have an experience of ambiguity, which he takes to be the experience of opposing demands without resolution, with those in which a definite direction is offered. From this perspective, he argues that one can distinguish, the depiction in Beauvoir's *She Came to Stay* of others pressing in on Françoise, with the way in which *The Blood of Others* offers a resolved solution to the crisis of mutual impingement. The moral of that later novel is one won't impact on others less by avoiding action than not; therefore, it is best to adopt a decisive course of action as responsibly as possible.

Yet for literature to expound a thesis – to write in that sense a novel of ideas¹⁰⁶ – is, Blanchot notes, a redundant exercise. Although he acknowledges that "there is no literary art that, directly or indirectly, does not want to assert or prove a truth," a viable idea is one that is "alive in the theoretical milieu where it took shape." Though it is sometimes argued that the characters are dull and lifeless in a work that attempts to communicate an idea, it is, suggests Blanchot, the idea itself that is "dead thoughts,"

a reconstruction of a dialogue; see "La littérature et le droit à la mort," first published in two parts during 1947–8, *Critique* 20 (January 1948), 30–47, reprinted in *La part du feu*, 312–31.

¹⁰⁵ Unlike the response to her work by Lukács and Merleau-Ponty, she recalled the exchange with Blanchot later in her autobiography in some detail, suggesting that she continued to be at least somewhat preoccupied with his response: "In his essay on the *roman à these*, Blanchot observes, with perfect justice, that to criticize a book for suggesting some ulterior idea is ridiculous. But, he adds, there is a great difference between *suggesting* and *demonstrating*: every facet of life is always rich in suggestion, yet this never proves anything conclusively. The writer's aim is to make people see the world, by recreating it in words: he betrays and impoverishes it if he does not respect its essential ambiguity. Blanchot does not class *She Came To Stay* as a *roman à these*, because it has an open ending, and no lesson could be drawn from it. On the other hand, he does put *Le sang des autres* (*The Blood of Others*) in this category: it reaches a clear-cut definite conclusion, which can be reduced to maxims and concepts. I agree with his finding. But the fault that he criticizes does not only mar the novels' final pages, it is inherent in the text from beginning to end" (Beauvoir, *Prime of Life*, 655–6). Beauvoir seems to have taken Blanchot's comments seriously, and introduces her account of them with this remark: "those whose judgement I value assure me it is a lesser work," 655.

¹⁰⁶ Merleau-Ponty reiterates concerns about the thesis novel in his essay on Beauvoir's *L'invitée* (*She Came to Stay*): "The function of the novelist is not to state these ideas thematically, but to make them exist for us in the way that things exist. Stendhal's role is not to hold forth on subjectivity; it is enough that he make it present"; see Merleau-Ponty, "Metaphysics and the Novel," 26–40, 26. His view is that literature and philosophy draw closer to each other when "a phenomenological or existential philosophy assigns itself the task, not of explaining the world or of discovering its 'conditions of possibility,' but rather of formulating an experience of the world, a contact with the world which precedes all thought *about* the world... from now on the tasks of literature and philosophy cannot be separated.... Philosophical expression assumes the same ambiguities as literary expression." He goes on to discuss Beauvoir's novel very favorably, but not, in fact, in terms of its experience of ambiguity, but rather as the end of a "moral" literature, claiming that the novel reveals a "true morality" beyond the "morality" at which these characters jeer," 28.

"lifeless," "it has only its own meaning," "it scarcely has any secrets to offer us."¹⁰⁷ When Beauvoir later reflected back in the *Prime of Life* on Blanchot's comments on her early fiction, she missed his point concerning the life or lifelessness of an idea, and thought instead in terms of the characters that had, she agreed, been flattened out in her attempt to communicate an ethics. She comments about *The Blood of Others*: "Reading the book today I find myself most struck by my characters' lack of depth."¹⁰⁸ She takes the problem to have been that she "slipped into didacticism"¹⁰⁹ by adopting a vision of literature as communicating a moral. She rejects that "slip," even in the period of Blanchot's essay and her immediate response in "Literature and Metaphysics." In this essay she agrees with the "many readers" who expect the novelist to "participate in the same search" on which the readers have been invited, to not "predic[t] in advance the conclusions," and to not "indiscreetly pressur[e] the reader into adhering to preestablished theses."¹¹⁰

But, even as she recognizes the validity of concerns about *The Blood of Others*, several aspects of Blanchot's critique, particularly his use of the term "ambiguity," seem opaque to her, and were more devastating than the criticism that her novels expounded theses. When she derives from her agreement the statement that only if a novel constitutes a living discovery for the author is it "imbued with value and dignity"¹¹¹ (thereby elevating the moral aspirations of literature), and when she describes the metaphysical novel that succeeds in a disclosure of existence as "honestly read, and honestly written,"¹¹² she dodges one of the disturbing aspects of Blanchot's response to her. "Fictional work," claimed Blanchot, "has nothing to do with honesty; it cheats, and exists only by cheating. . . . It is hand in glove, in every reader, with the lie."¹¹³

Blanchot was not describing the inauthentic literature discussed in Sartre's *What is Literature*,¹¹⁴ which might well be said to exist by cheating, for that description distinguished deceitful from committed and more authentic literature. In that case, for example, a deceitful literature might

¹⁰⁷ Blanchot, "The Novels of Sartre," 191–2. ¹⁰⁸ Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 656.

¹⁰⁹ Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 656. ¹¹⁰ Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics," 271.

¹¹¹ Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics," 271. ¹¹² Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics," 276.

¹¹³ "L'oeuvre de fiction n'a rien à voir avec l'honnêteté: elle triche et n'existe qu'en trichant. Elle a partie liée, dans tout lecteur, avec le mensonge" ("Les romans de Sartre," *La part du feu*, 189). On fiction as deceit, see Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), discussing Blanchot's view of art as "taking us to the abyss where truth can find no traction" (65, discussing Blanchot's *L'espace littéraire*), and discussing Blanchot's essay on Gide, in which he defines literature as "an experience that is essentially deceiving, and that is what creates all its value," citing Blanchot's "Literature and the Right to Death," in Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," in *The Work of Fire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 301.

¹¹⁴ See Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Methuen, 1950).

be one in which the author is attempting to erect a literary creation that will secure his or her place in history. Beauvoir and Sartre acknowledged that there were cheating forms of literature, but they contrasted such forms with an ideal version to which they strived, which was maximally honest. As such, they dodged the possibility that the most truthful literature might be the most deceitful. Blanchot's point that literature must inevitably embody deceit was also not like Sartre's account of the near inevitability of subtle forms of bad faith in everyday life. To depict the ubiquity of bad faith was certainly not to affirm it. Blanchot's inevitably lying and cheating literature is of a different order. He questions an authenticity that fails to render ambiguity, that which "makes obvious what it means . . . puts itself honestly, entirely, in the service of truth," as opposed to the necessary bad faith of true literature. In a hide-and-seek movement, true literature "progresses by oblique ways":

The novel is a work of bad faith, bad faith on the part of the novelist who believes in his characters and yet sees himself behind them, who does not know them [*qui les ignore*], realizes them as unknowns [*inconnus*], and finds in the language of which he is a master the means of manipulating them [*le moyen de disposer d'eux*] without ceasing to believe that they are escaping him [*qu'ils lui échappent*]. Bad faith of the reader who plays with the imaginary, who plays at being this hero that he is not, at taking for real what is fiction and finally lets himself be taken in [*s'y laisse prendre*].¹¹⁵

Thus when Blanchot describes ambiguity – "Literary art is ambiguous [*ambigu*]. That means that none of its demands [*exigences*] can exclude the opposing demand: on the contrary, the more they oppose each other, the more they evoke each other [*plus elles s'opposent, plus elles s'appellent*]. That is also why no literary situation is definitively settled [*réglée*]"¹¹⁶ – one can see both how close and how far Beauvoir is from this concept of ambiguity. Close, because Beauvoir certainly affirms the notion of irresolvable instability, the necessity of tension. Far, however, because she also appeals to an authentic relationship one can take up in relation to irresolvable instability, for example, that of honesty, avowal, affirmation. For Blanchot, ambiguity is indissociable from the inevitability of a "bad faith."¹¹⁷ Beauvoir saw

¹¹⁵ Blanchot, *The Novels of Sartre*, 193, trans. mod.

¹¹⁶ Blanchot, *The Novels of Sartre*, 193.

¹¹⁷ On ambiguity in Blanchot, see also Blanchot, "From Dread to Language," in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, ed. George Quasha (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill, 1999), 343–38, which makes the point that for a writer ambiguity "cannot be conceived as a solution. As soon as it is part of a project and appears as the expression of a scheme, it gives up the multiplicity which is its nature and freezes in the form of an artifice whose exterior complexity is constantly being reduced by the intention that has brought it into being. . . . Where the enigma shows itself as such, it vanishes," 352. Also see Blanchot's "Two Versions of the Imaginary," in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, ed. Quasha, 417–27: "ambiguity expresses being as dissimulated; it says that being is, insofar as it is

the possibility of an alternative to bad faith, and considered it the ideal. For Beauvoir, good faith would be a means of avoiding dishonesty. For Blanchot, it would be a form of dishonesty.

This is why Blanchot took the notions of conversion, however tentatively expressed, in the work of Beauvoir and Sartre, to be indicative.¹¹⁸ For Blanchot there could never be a conversion of the kind that Beauvoir and Sartre vaguely hypothesized, for concepts of conversion involved greater honesty in relation to the ambiguity of being. For the Blanchot of this essay, literature would require a particular kind of constitutive dishonesty.

Certainly *The Blood of Others* may be taken as the author's depiction of many of the ambiguities she later mentions in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, the ambiguity between a being-for-oneself and a being-for-others, between being responsible for oneself and responsible for others. But, the novel is resolved without ambiguity: Blomart, the protagonist, comes to the clear realization that he cannot avoid impinging on others, even by attempting to minimize his impact on them. The novel might thematize ambiguity, but as a piece of writing it is entirely unambiguous.¹¹⁹ Similarly, while Beauvoir recognizes and seems to affirm Blanchot's reservations about the novel of ideas, both in her 1945 essay and later in her autobiography, she also adheres to the ideal of a clear-cut, responsible recognition of ambiguity. By contrast, we are confronted, following Blanchot's essay, with the question of what an ambiguous "realization" of ambiguity would be like. It is the exigencies of Beauvoir's own work that open up the question, and yet the question is not articulated within her work.

On the other hand, exploring a challenge Blanchot's response presents to Beauvoir's work, we should also direct a number of questions back at Blanchot.¹²⁰ What is effected, in our understanding of Beauvoir, when

dissimulated," 427. To return to Blanchot's essay on Gide, where art is "mystification or deception," this illusion is described as carriage by "the most ambiguous movement," and Hart comments on this passage, "the ambiguity is between the possible and the impossible, death and dying, that which confers meaning and that which cannot be ascribed a meaning. To write is to risk losing one's relation to meaning and the world, or equally, to risk finding oneself in relation with what has no meaning and no world"; see Blanchot, "Gide and the Experience of Literature," in Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 220, and Hart, *The Dark Gaze*, 139.

¹¹⁸ See the epigraph to this chapter, in which Blanchot speaks of the "evolution," the veritable "conversion" (*conversion*) of Beauvoir's *Blood of Others*, designated to us as "solution," "end," as having "value" (Blanchot, *The Novels of Sartre*, 200).

¹¹⁹ By contrast, Beauvoir takes Blanchot to be claiming that *She Came to Stay* is preferable in its ambiguous conclusion.

¹²⁰ Among other possible interrogations, Beauvoir's work constitutes a conceptual resource for an interrogation of the status of femininity in his work, and further resources for such an interrogation would include Françoise Collin's work on Blanchot, and on depictions of femininity, and essays included in *L'Oeuvre du féminin dans l'écriture de Maurice Blanchot*, ed. Eric Hoppenot (Grignan: Les Editions Complicités, 2004).

Blanchot makes a point of noting that in her literature (as in that of Sartre) there are tendencies toward ambiguity, and tendencies to resist it? He offers a comparison of *She Came to Stay* and *The Blood of Others*, and the juxtaposition of the works could be described (though it is certainly not an expression used by Blanchot) as a manifestation of auto-resistance in Beauvoir's work – for example, between her commitment to the equivocal and her tentative commitment to some moral principles.

The refrain locatable in some of Beauvoir's theoretical writings, such as *Ethics of Ambiguity*, is that it is possible to “want” or “will” tension (*vouloir tension*). This claim prompts the question of what form that attitude might take in one's literature *and* in philosophical writing – as opposed to the easier task of thematizing tension, or drawing conclusions about it. Beauvoir's work combined a writing that engaged the problems of ethics, as she saw them, and a writing in which ethics offers a provisional direction. Her work staged the tension between an ambivalent ethics and one that aspires to clarity. Merleau-Ponty wrote, in his essay on Beauvoir's fiction, “There is no Last Judgement. Not only do we not know the truth of the drama, but there is no truth – no other side of things where true and false, fair and unfair are separated out.”¹²¹ She likely agreed with him that there is “no way to test the authenticity of these commitments.”¹²² However, Merleau-Ponty optimistically concluded that nonetheless “the value is there. It consists of actively being what we are by chance, of establishing that communication with others and with ourselves for which our temporal structure gives us the opportunity,” and he warmly mentioned the “good faith, the loyalty to promises, the respect for others, the generosity and the seriousness”¹²³ of Beauvoir's Françoise and Pierre. Beauvoir herself establishes that these (respect, generosity . . .) are values. Yet her own view of the absence of any truth or last judgment concerning subjective inter-relations would return us to a tension that must dislodge any facile identification of “generosity,” “respect,” or “communication” as definitively taking place at a given time. The uncertainties of her precarious reciprocity imply a far more risky ethics and intersubjectivity. For if the definition she offers of “reciprocity” suggests that it can never be calculated or certain (and thus, in a formal sense, never be reliably “reciprocal”), we suppose that the ethics, similarly, can never be calculated or certain. At the limit, the Beauvoirian ethics would take place under the sign of its own impossibility. This is not to suggest that it would simply not take place, or that there is no Beauvoirian

¹²¹ Beauvoir, “Literature and Metaphysics,” 36.

¹²² Beauvoir, “Literature and Metaphysics,” 40.

¹²³ Beauvoir, “Literature and Metaphysics,” 40.

ethics, but rather, that a Beauvoirian ethics must be affirmed as paradoxical.

Moreover, Beauvoir's work disparages forms of bad faith, yet also offers an account of why there is no definitive "good faith". Blanchot himself might have pursued further the ambivalent relationship he was effectively locating in Beauvoir's work, one that hovered between aspirations of ethical ambiguity and aspirations to an unambiguous ethical ambiguity. Perhaps the ambivalence between these positions speaks more loudly than Blanchot credits. In the guise of accepting Blanchot's criticisms, Beauvoir resisted the important elements of Blanchot's response. Yet there is also auto-resistance to be located in Beauvoir's work. I have suggested that it is at work in her simultaneously adhering to an ethics of ambiguity and calling that ethics into question.

Finally, one could explore the further potential of viewing Blanchot's work as a force resisting Beauvoir, such that Blanchot is tacitly engaged by her work.

BLANCHOT'S SLEEPER

Responding to the resonance of ambiguity for Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and other philosophers,¹²⁴ Beauvoir also encountered Blanchot's discussion of ambiguity. Her positive reiteration of his use of the term nonetheless amounted to a conversion of Blanchotian ambiguity on her part.

Blanchot articulated the notion in such a fashion as to show that it must always be calling itself into question. Describing the self-sabotaging necessities of literature, he wrote:

[T]he novel has its own moral, which is ambiguity and equivocation. It has its own reality, which is the ability to discover the world in the unreal and the imaginary. And finally it has its truth, which forces it to assert nothing without seeking to counter it, and to make nothing succeed without preparing its failure, so that every argument that triumphs in a novel immediately stops being true.¹²⁵

He defined ambiguity as the calls or demands (*exigencies*) that evoke each other the more they oppose each other,¹²⁶ defining one of the

¹²⁴ See footnotes 101, 102, and 103.

¹²⁵ Blanchot, *The Novels of Sartre*, 207. "*Le roman a sa morale propre, qui est l'ambiguïté et l'équivoque. Il a sa réalité propre, qui est le pouvoir de découvrir le monde dans l'irréel et l'imaginaire. Et, enfin, il a sa vérité, qui l'oblige à ne rien affirmer sans chercher à le reprendre et à ne rien faire réussir sans en préparer l'échec, de sorte que toute thèse qui dans un roman triomphe cesse aussitôt d'être vraie*" ("Les romans de Sartre," 203).

essential conditions of literature as the ambiguity of the message.¹²⁷ Beauvoir takes the critical point to be that literature's message must be ambiguous, and understands Blanchot to be interrogating the status of the message in literature. Thus we find her, in "Literature and Metaphysics," written after and apparently responding to Blanchot's essay, agreeing that "literature cannot be translated into abstract concepts."¹²⁸ Yet she leaves aside three points: first, as we have seen, that there might be, in literature, a vital and affirmative bad faith; and second, that one can't strive for a lack of ambiguity (and, Blanchot would suggest, an "honesty" about ambiguity).

Third, Blanchot and Beauvoir discussed the turn to literature by philosophers for whom philosophy "turns back to things, to the world and men, and seeks to grasp them in their unobscured significance."¹²⁹ But if philosophy is inclined to effect this turn, there is no reason that the philosopher's non-literary work should be less engaged than his or her literature in the problem of ambiguity, for what else is prompting the perceived necessity? Blanchot and Beauvoir are discussing philosophy that turned to literature to articulate ambiguity. Yet Blanchot notes that in turning to literature, philosophy turned to what must involve it in the necessities of dishonesty, equivocality, trickery, and hide-and-seek, the contradictory demands that evoke each other increasingly as they oppose each other, the dilemma of how to *retain* the ambiguity of the thickness of things (or, how to mark the trace of the inevitable, paradoxical self-vanishing of this ambiguity). Discussing the turn to literature, Beauvoir comments that "there may even be thoughts that cannot, without contradiction, be expressed in a categorical manner."¹³⁰ But such philosophy must also engage with that which is driving it to literature. If there is a necessary ambiguity in seeking to grasp the thickness of things, can there really be clear and unambiguous statements about this ambiguity in philosophy, any more than there can be in literature – particularly if the former has turned to the latter because faced with that very dilemma? This is not a dilemma that can be occluded with the alibi that an ambiguous depiction of ambiguity is the proper work of literature alone, for in this case philosophy has turned to literature because its capacities to express ambiguity have been found wanting.

What did Beauvoir make of the encounter with Blanchot?¹³¹ It is evident that she is optimistic about the possibility of conveying the "ambiguous

¹²⁶ Blanchot, *The Novels of Sartre*, 193. ¹²⁷ Blanchot, *The Novels of Sartre*, 196.

¹²⁸ Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics," 270. ¹²⁹ Blanchot, *The Novels of Sartre*, 194.

¹³⁰ Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics," 274.

¹³¹ For further occasional remarks about Blanchot in Beauvoir's writing, see for example, Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics," 276; Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, 139; and Beauvoir, "Faut-il brûler Sade," 79.

richness of the world”¹³² and that she reiterates the belief in an authentic literature.¹³³ She ignores his suggestion that ambiguity might necessitate a paradoxically *affirmed* bad faith.¹³⁴ Insofar as she responds to Blanchot, it could be said that she “turns” his concept of ambiguity. It is another conversion, indeed a conversion in every sense since ambiguity as Blanchot had discussed it is reenlisted in Beauvoir’s implicit rhetoric of conversion (it becomes transformation, the prospect of honesty, and so on).

If so, this opens up an alternative possibility for how to understand the relationship between Blanchot and Beauvoir and their nexus over ambiguity. It will be recalled that in some of the most powerful existing readings of Beauvoir, her appropriations and conversions of philosophers are considered to perform a surreptitious critique, an operative work of resistance to, or appropriation of the figures with whom she is in dialogue, such as Hegel and Sartre.¹³⁵ But what of the inverse relationship? Is it only Beauvoir, in these encounters, who performs the work of resistance? What of Beauvoir’s encounter with and conversion of the most difficult aspects of Blanchot’s discussion of ambiguity? Could one argue that, as unexplored associations of ambiguity, the connotations suggested by Blanchot and averted by Beauvoir continued to inhabit her work? Her work bears witness to an excluded encounter, a possibility that Blanchot resists Beauvoir, which would call for further exploration of the potential dialogue between them.

It is often and rightly said that Beauvoir tacitly resisted the figures she appropriated. We might add to such readings by thinking, also, about how the objects of Beauvoir’s conversions similarly resisted her. This maximizes our understanding of the unspoken as well as active debates she engaged in, those that multiplied the directions in which her work could be taken. “Ambiguity” was a term with still further possibilities for her own work. The term would continue to inhabit her writing, particularly *The Second Sex*¹³⁶ and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Ambiguity continued to operate as a placeholder for internal excess to her own formulations. Consider the appeal to ambiguity in the concluding pages of *The Second Sex*, used to

¹³² Beauvoir, “Literature and Metaphysics,” 275.

¹³³ Beauvoir, “Literature and Metaphysics,” 272. “This authenticity distinguishes a truly great work from a simply clever work.”

¹³⁴ At best, she mentions her admission that “art implies artifice, hence a certain measure of bad faith and lies,” “Literature and Metaphysics,” 271.

¹³⁵ See Le Doeuff on Beauvoir, discussed in the introduction, and Bauer on Beauvoir as effecting a transformational appropriation of Hegel rather than a derivation of him, discussed in this chapter.

¹³⁶ See, for example, Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US80, 443, 467, 514–5, 497, 517; UK112–3, 462, 485, 514, 532, 737; Fr1133, 221; Il266, 309, 332, Fr11573. See, for example, her ideal discussion of love and desire in terms of mutual gift, the willingness to be subject and object simultaneously, reciprocally consenting carnal fever as “an ambiguity of existence made body,” (US728, UK737, Fr11573).

describe the potential and actual relationship between men and women. Taking as a reference point the erotics of a hypothetical heterosexual couple, Beauvoir locates as one kind of ambiguity our existence as consciousness and as flesh, as instant moment and as suspended in time, as immanent and transcendent, as pleasure and forgetfulness. Such contradictions, she argues, will never be resolved, and that is not to be hoped for – thus we see the idea of our “wanting tension” (*vouloir tension*) return. These affirmed contradictory states would, in fact, be enhanced by women’s eventual legal, political, institutional (and other forms of) equality. The reason is that such political and social reform would increase the capacity for men and women as lovers (and doubtless as friends, as she has elsewhere stated – and family relations, colleagues, and so on) to be simultaneously, and the one for the other, subject and object. This is a maximal possible experience of ambiguity that has, in her view, been hindered by women’s inequality.¹³⁷ Thus Beauvoir associates the emancipation of women with one formulation of an ideal for the indeterminable intersubjective reciprocity she evokes, in which “mutually recognizing [*se reconnaissant mutuellement*] each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other as an *other*.”¹³⁸ Beauvoir pits this against an alternative reaction to ambiguity, the failure to want tension. In that case, returning to her emblematic couple, each partner thinks she or he encounters (*s’affronter*) the other, but what is occurring is actually a struggling with oneself, each “projecting onto the partner that part of the self which is repudiated.”¹³⁹ It is in the willingness to seek tension that Beauvoir places her hopes for alternative modes of encountering the other, besides as a repudiated version of oneself. Both subjects would have to willingly take up the position of simultaneous subject and other. This possibility is thoroughly impeded by the fact that one of the pair already occupies a historicized and sedimented role as appropriated object and other. Thus Beauvoir’s ethics of ambiguity intersect with a politics of institutional reform. More institutional equality could allow for more possibilities of ambiguous reciprocity. But as Beauvoir stresses, this is not a reliable or calculable outcome: mutual risk is importantly incurred in a willing vulnerability.

Yet ambiguity also remains the “sleeper term,” carrying a question that Blanchot had earlier directed at Beauvoir. Hasn’t something gone badly wrong in an unambiguous, an aspirationally “honest,” unequivocal

¹³⁷ Beauvoir argues that men and women cannot valuably and truly “risk” vulnerability toward each other if the one is already in a subordinate relationship to the other. The value of mutual risk is inhibited by an institutional or structural subordination.

¹³⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US731; UK740; FrII576.

¹³⁹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US728; UK737; FrII573.

depiction of the equivocal? Residing within the prose, the word “ambiguity” holds out as a possible locus of interrogation of her ideal of the man and the woman assuming (*assumaient*) ambiguity with “clear-sighted modesty, correlative of an authentic pride [*une lucide modestie, correlative d’un authentique orgueil*].”¹⁴⁰

Such an unambiguous vision of men and women and their relations of ambiguity, this image of the proud and modest, clear-sighted couple, is unlikely to work well as literature. Blanchot’s inevitable, querying resistance is embedded in the nexus with Beauvoir’s work on ambiguity. This helps us to ask whether the image works any better as philosophy. Think of Blanchot’s comment to the *roman à these* novelist: “in vain does he people his books with uncomplicated heroes, in vain does he rigorously submit his story to the test it proposes . . . everything works against him.”¹⁴¹ No less than literature, isn’t the corresponding philosophy supposed to “abandon preconceived ideas and implicit constructions”?¹⁴² Shouldn’t we accordingly recall the vision of literature associated with ambiguity: “assert nothing without seeking to counter it, and to make nothing succeed without preparing its failure, so that every argument that triumphs in a novel immediately stops being true”?¹⁴³

Beauvoir can be interpreted as having converted Blanchot’s notion of ambiguity in her response to him. If some of the multiple possibilities accompanying that conversion continue to put up a kind of embedded, implicit resistance to Beauvoir’s conclusions, what are the implications for *The Second Sex*? We can ask how Blanchot’s question similarly inhabits *The Second Sex* as a silent sleeper. Beauvoir converts ambiguity to a vision (in the very affirmation of ambiguity, and of the vision of men and women who might affirm ambiguity) of men and women’s “clear-sighted modesty,” their “authentic pride.” Blanchot’s resisting question invites us to speculate on how *The Second Sex* might have further engaged a more profoundly ambiguous depiction and experience of ambiguity. Beauvoir made the literary philosophical, for all her qualms on this point. What if she had allowed the philosophy to be more literary, in Blanchot’s sense, a sense with which, it will be recalled, she had stated her agreement?¹⁴⁴ In other

¹⁴⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US728; UK737; FrII. ¹⁴¹ Blanchot, “The Novels of Sartre,” 193.

¹⁴² Blanchot, “The Novels of Sartre,” 194. ¹⁴³ Blanchot, “The Novels of Sartre,” 207.

¹⁴⁴ I suggested in the introduction an additional possibility for approaching Beauvoir’s work. It can also be thought of as a network of appropriated philosophers, her (occasional) resistance to the philosophers she appropriated, auto-resistance within her own work, and the (occasional) resistance to her of appropriated philosophers. Further, one sometimes sees intersections occurring in her work between different figures she is appropriating, as when the *The Second Sex* embodies a reference to Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty on embodiment, or to Merleau-Ponty and Marx, separately, on sex. The implicit responses to Merleau-Ponty, and to Blanchot’s remarks on *She Came to Stay*,

words, what would have been an ethics of ambiguity, thought of in this perspective – one resistant, one might say, to conversion in every sense – in *The Second Sex*? It is ironic that Blanchot's depictions of femininity appear to be one of the most conventional aspects of his work. Beauvoir could bring that critique to Blanchot, while leaving further room to explore the unpredictable potential of an implicit dialogue between the two. A more stimulating latent conversation about ambiguity might be available. Expanding the limited dialogue between them produces further resources for an interrogation of the unambiguous ethics of ambiguity at work in *The Second Sex*.¹⁴⁵

could be considered further instances of this kind of intersection. Commenting on her novel, Merleau-Ponty claims, as we have seen, that "value is there. It consists of actively being what we are by chance, of establishing that communication with others and with ourselves for which our temporal structure gives us the opportunity and of which our liberty gives us only the rough outline" (Merleau-Ponty, "Metaphysics and the Novel," 40). Though there seems to have been no direct exchange between Blanchot and Merleau-Ponty on this point, their indirect discussion of "value" could be identified in their indirect intersection over Sartre and Beauvoir.

¹⁴⁵ Note that another possibility for Beauvoir's conversion seems to lurk in Sartre's description of Genet, which does demarcate Genet's literary production as the author's conversion. Among the important points for Sartre is that Genet's conversion – in this case his transformation of imposed stigma into a defiant assumption – happens at no particular time and by no particular act of will: it can be identified, but not temporally located. Sartre's comment on Genet (quoted below) prompts one to speculate whether Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* could possibly be described in at least partly similar terms: it too bears the traces of "making and rejecting itself, observing and knowing itself while being unaware of itself." This is a valid and interesting question, allowing for different kinds of analysis of the ambiguity embedded in *The Second Sex*. Still, we can ask whether her visions of reciprocally recognizing modest and authentic lovers who do not project onto each other are sufficiently ambiguous. Sartre's comment is as follows: "But at the same time, this work is, without the author's suspecting it, the journal of a detoxification, of a conversion. In it Genet detoxicates himself of himself and turns to the outside world. In fact, this book *is* the detoxification itself. It is not content with bearing witness to the cure, but concretizes it. Born of a nightmare, it effects, line by line, page by page, from death to life, from the state of dream to that of waking, from madness to sanity – a passageway that is marked by relapses. Before *Our Lady*, Genet was an aesthete, after it, an artist. But at no moment was a decision *made* to achieve this conversion. The decision *is Our Lady*. Throughout *Our Lady*, it both makes and rejects itself, observes and knows itself, is unaware of itself, plays tricks on itself and encumbers itself everywhere, even in the relapses. On every page it is born of its opposite, and at the very moment it leads Genet to the borderline of awakening, it leaves on the page the sticky traces of the most monstrous dream" (Sartre, *Saint Genet*, 449).

CHAPTER 2

American Bad Faith

I used to be very surprised to find so much indifference toward the position of women in the very person who would later write *The Second Sex* (but neither of us knew that at the time).

Colette Audry, "Portrait of the Writer as a Young Woman"¹

While Beauvoir recounted in her autobiography that she had paid no attention to women's suffrage activism, she had nonetheless greatly valued being considered the intellectual peer and colleague of the male philosophy students. She initially considered this evidence that being a woman had been of no significance in her life. Yet her depiction of many of the women characters in her fiction suggested a troubled preoccupation: she presented tremulous, selfish, capricious, narcissistic, and child-like characters, such as *The Blood of Others*'s Hélène, *All Men Are Mortal*'s Regina, and *She Came to Stay*'s Xavière. Her view of women writers was ambivalent, expressing a creative ambivalence she attributed to them. She would claim (to Nelson Algren) that Colette was the only really great woman writer of France,² describe Carson McCullers's writing as "too womanly, too poetical and quivering and full of secret meaning,"³ and comment that "nearly all women-writers are a little shy, even in the artistic ground, a little too sweet and subtle." Though praising Violette le Duc's writing (le Duc's

¹ Colette Audry, "Portrait of the Writer as a Young Woman," *Critical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Elaine Marks (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co, 1987), 18–21, 21. See Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), and Bair, "Introduction to the Vintage Edition," *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1989), vii–xvii, ix, for the account of how Beauvoir returned to Audry's idea for a project that the two women had, circa 1936, discussed. Bair's account is based on an interview she conducted with Audry in 1986. On this, see also Ian Birchall, "Prequel to the Heidegger Debate, Audry and Sartre," *Radical Philosophy* 88 (1998): 19–27.

² Letter of March 6, 1948, Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair: Letters to Nelson Algren* (New York: New Press, 1998), 180.

³ Letter of Nov. 27, 1947, Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 111.

“feminine sensitiveness” notwithstanding), Beauvoir suggested she wrote “like a man.”⁴

AMERICA DAY BY DAY

Before visiting America in 1947, Beauvoir had begun research and work toward a study of women’s situation,⁵ but her few comments overtly expressing interest in that situation before she undertook the project had – apart from a brief mention in *Ethics of Ambiguity*⁶ and her depictions of women in her novels – been based in her autobiographical interests and in a project of self-examination. She recalled that the first time the situation of women seemed a viable book project, one of her sources of inspiration was Michel Leiris’s *L’âge d’homme* (1939, translated as *Manhood*).⁷ For Leiris, literature (in this case autobiographical), in its struggle for maximal sincerity and lucidity and the exposure of one’s own weak, shameful, and sexual aspects, is considered a form of confessional bullfighting. As Beauvoir says, she wanted to write about herself and liked such “sacrificial essays [*essais-martyrs*].”⁸

Though the fact of being a woman was the first question she confronted, Beauvoir found a viable means of realizing the book only after she had returned to France, researched methodologies for the analysis of social

⁴ Letter of 7 October 1947, Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 74. Of course, these are comments about women and women writers that might particularly appeal to Algren’s non- or anti-feminism, and Beauvoir seems, in correspondence, to have loved to generate a shared bubble of complicity with a recipient’s views except when crisis or real discord arose.

⁵ Having discussed with her friend Audry the idea for a work on women a decade earlier, and after mentioning that she had been approached by Georges Blin in May 1946 on the subject of a work on existentialism and sexuality, she claimed in *Force of Circumstance* that the idea came to her spontaneously around June 1946 in the context of conversations with Sartre in which, wanting to write about herself, she mused – struck that this is the first relevant question – about what it had meant to be a woman and then began to research myths of femininity at the Bibliothèque Nationale (Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard [London: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1965], 79; 94–5). By the time of her arrival in the United States in 1947, she explains in an interview with *The New Yorker* for its “Talk of the Town” section that her next book will be on women (*The New Yorker* 23, no. 1 [Feb. 22, 1947]: 19–20).

⁶ Beauvoir comments, “The less economic and social circumstances allow an individual to act upon the world, the more this world appears to him as given. This is the case of women who inherit a long tradition of submission” (Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, tr. Bernard Frechtman [New York: Citadel, 1976], 48).

⁷ However, on this see Ursula Tidd’s study on autobiography in Beauvoir’s work. Tidd points out that in fact there are few similarities between the approaches to autobiography of Leiris and Beauvoir (the former is, for example, inspired by surrealism and psychoanalysis), and speculates that despite her expressed general enthusiasm, the latter may have been most inspired by Leiris’s frank approach to sexuality (Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir, Gender and Testimony* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 107).

⁸ Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 94.

relations and racism in America, and produced a book discussing the latter. This encounter must be included with every other kind of condition enfolded within *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir's would not be the last of the French feminisms reoriented by an American envelope.

The official theme of Beauvoir's lectures in the United States was the moral responsibility of postwar writers.⁹ She was by now willing to present herself as a representative of French existentialism,¹⁰ but she would also, retrospectively, take on the role of "diarist" recording her impressions of her visit – impressions published, in the first instance, in *Les temps modernes*, and then in *Amérique au jour le jour* in 1948. Adopting the mode of cultural commentary, she looked for phenomena symptomatic of the social context: its constraints, provocations, and paradoxes. Contemplating American women (basing her comments on Vassar college students and her days in New York), she considers individuals not as particular cases but as exemplary of the intersection of rules and incitements, the heightening of desire, the investment in comfort and discomfort, the attachment to mystique, the divisions of class.

Some early entries of *America Day by Day* seem to foreshadow the imminent analyses of *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir diagnoses the incitement of urban women to be sufficiently feminine. Consumerist *moeurs* produce women as conventional, highly cultivated objects of male scrutiny. They desire the veneer of luxury, though it often comes at a high price, and their femininity is a bifurcated mix of ambivalent pleasure and pain at the appraisal they undergo. Whether in jeans or furs, American women are wearing conformist costumes. Their attachment or subjection to the uniform economically disadvantages them:

A woman's social success is closely tied to how luxurious she looks; this is a terrible burden [*une terrible servitude*] for the poor. A working girl, a secretary, is forced to spend around 25 per cent of her salary on the beauty parlor [*frais de coiffeur*]

⁹ She spoke at a great number of universities and colleges, including Yale, Harvard, Columbia, Princeton, UCLA, University of Chicago, Wellesley, Vassar, and Smith. Francis and Gontier reproduce clippings and details from university and local papers recording the topics of her lectures, and some talks and interviews from this period also exist. See Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier, *Les écrits de Simone de Beauvoir La vie-l'écriture. Textes inédits ou retrouvés* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), which includes short pieces Beauvoir wrote during this period for *The New York Times*, *France-Amérique*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *The New York Times Magazine*, the latter three of which are translated in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret Simons (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

¹⁰ She describes her initial reserve to naming herself in this way in *The Prime of Life*, trans. Peter Green (New York: Lancer, 1965), 659, and in *Force of Circumstance*, 38.

and cosmetics. She would be looked down on if she came to the office in the same outfit two days in a row.¹¹

It impairs their freedom of movement:

Another fact strikes me as significant: the standard clothing imposed on the American woman is not designed for her convenience; these women who keenly defend their independence on every occasion and so easily become aggressive toward men, nevertheless dress for men. Those heels that paralyze their movement, those fragile feathers, those flowers in the dead of winter – all those showy things [*falbalas*] are clearly finery meant to emphasize their femininity and to attract masculine looks. The truth is that the garb of European women is much less servile.¹²

And it has an inhibiting effect on their subjectivity. Orienting themselves primarily toward the scrutiny of others (“I think that American women never dress for comfort, for themselves”¹³) impairs, in a variety of ways, the capacity of a woman to exist “for herself.”

In letters, journal entries, and fictional writing, Beauvoir had expressed irritation at expectations relating to her own existence or that of women close to her. She offered disparaging assessments of particular women (for example, for their superficiality, passivity, self-involvement, indifference to politics, or capriciousness). A journal entry from 1939 describes her being haunted by the image of passionate, intellectual women (colleagues and fictional heroines) who proudly feign to choose what they endure. Beauvoir describes how aggravating she finds these women who take themselves to be distinctive because of the extremity of their experience, declaring that she doesn’t want to resemble them.¹⁴ She is reflecting on a mode of femininity or existence she deems specific to some women, but the individualism of her reflections is clear as she goes on to describe what interests her. It is “femininity: the way in which I both am, and am not, my sex. That would have to be outlined, and also, what I ask from life in general, and from my thinking, and how I situate myself in the world.”¹⁵

¹¹ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, trans. Carol Cosman (California: University of California Press, 1999), 50; Beauvoir, *L’Amérique au jour le jour* (Paris: Gallimard [Folio]), 73.

¹² Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 50; Fr73–4. ¹³ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 50; Fr73.

¹⁴ Entry of Nov. 3, 1939 in Beauvoir, *Journal de guerre septembre 1939–janvier 1941* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 125–6. The preferred alternative is said to be deliberate humility (though she acknowledges this is no more sincere), and the acknowledgement of nausea.

¹⁵ “ma «féminité», la manière dont je suis de mon sexe et n’en suis pas. Ça serait à définir et aussi en général ce que je demande à ma vie, à ma pensée, et comment je me situe dans le monde” (Beauvoir, *Journal de guerre*, 126).

At this point, “being and not being a woman” is little more on Beauvoir’s part than an interest in herself. But her early writing suggests her perturbation by modes of existence she seems to have considered characteristic of women: whether narcissistic, manipulative, grim, or self-denying.¹⁶ For a long period, Beauvoir personalizes the issue. She describes herself as a combination of masculinity and femininity, and as wanting to be both a woman and a man.¹⁷ After the diary entry noting that she might attempt some kind of self-study prompted by this question of both being and not being her sex, she reconsiders: “I don’t think I will undertake this project of studying and defining myself.”¹⁸

La Force des choses/Force of Circumstance depicts Beauvoir’s supposed memory of the circumstances under which she returned to the project. According to this reconstruction, it began around June 1946 with a return of her interest in a self-study. Having just finished the novel *All Men Are Mortal*, she writes, “In fact, I wanted to write about myself. . . I let the idea begin to take shape, made a few notes, and talked to Sartre about it. I realized that the first question to come up was: What has it meant to me to be a woman?”¹⁹

Beauvoir’s interest in the problem of being a woman repeatedly returned her to the possibilities of introspection, a self-study from which she just as consistently seems to have shied away. Now, however, her reflections took a different route. She writes, “At first I thought I could dispose of that pretty quickly. I had never had any feeling of inferiority, no one had ever said to me: ‘You think that way because you’re a woman’: my femininity had never been irksome to me in any way [*ma féminité ne m’avait gênée en rien*]. ‘For me,’ I said to Sartre, ‘you might almost say it just hasn’t counted.’”²⁰

La force de l’âge/The Prime of Life recorded a similar sentiment: “I did not think of myself as ‘a woman’: I was *me*.”²¹ Earlier, in her wartime journal, self-study had seemed intertwined with Beauvoir’s confronting her existence as a woman and with her ambivalent avoidance of that

¹⁶ Consider the six portraits of women written between 1935–7, eventually published in 1979 as *Quand prime le spirituel* (Beauvoir, *When Things of the Spirit Come First*, tr. Patrick O’Brian [New York: Pantheon, 1982]).

¹⁷ See letter of Thursday, July 3, 1947, Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 41.

¹⁸ Entry of Nov. 5, 1939: “*je ne crois pas que je ferai ce travail d’étude et de définition de moi-même*.” She provides the further explanation “*il faudrait se sentir plus «en retraite»*” (Beauvoir, *Journal de guerre*, 129).

¹⁹ Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 94. ²⁰ Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 94.

²¹ (“*je ne me pensais pas comme ‘une femme’: j’étais moi*”) Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 71, 73. Notwithstanding this comment, *Memoires of a Dutiful Daughter* had depicted considerable frustration with the constraints on the life of a bourgeois girl, with respect to the confining expectations of her role, education, and behavior.

problematic. *La Force de l'âge* narrates Beauvoir's sentiment that she had a great deal to lose from a feminist politics about whose possibility she apparently was vaguely aware. Adopting a feminist perspective would have meant accepting a self-identity as a secondary or relative being. "My whole being," she writes, "fought against such a degradation."²² In an exemplary "kettle logic,"²³ either sexual difference is a false category (we aren't "sexed," we are simply "ourselves"); or if it is a relevant category, it is nevertheless one that makes no significant difference ("*ma féminité ne m'avait gênée en rien*"); or it is precisely because it has made a great deal of difference that the category is too costly.

It is purportedly Sartre who encouraged her to bear with the problem.²⁴ She ascribes to him the intervention: "All the same, you weren't brought up in the same way as a boy would have been: you should look into it further," Sartre said.²⁵

I looked, and it was a revelation: this world was a masculine world, my childhood had been nourished by myths forged by men, and I hadn't reacted to them in at all the same way I should have done if I had been a boy. I was so interested in this discovery that I abandoned my project for a personal confession in order to give all my attention to finding out about the condition of woman [*la condition féminine*] in its broadest terms [*dans sa généralité*]. I went to the Bibliothèque Nationale to do some reading, and what I studied were the myths of femininity.²⁶

But what theoretical resources were available for her to pursue this undertaking? Beauvoir completed some initial research, made a start on

²² Translated as "To accept a secondary status in life, that of a merely ancillary being, would have been to degrade my own humanity" (Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 73).

²³ Derrida suggests Freud's so-called "kettle logic" be used as a means of thinking the status of "writing" for Plato: "One would have to recognise here an instance of that kind of 'kettle-logic' to which Freud turns in the *Traumdeutung* [*Interpretation of Dreams*] in order to illustrate the logic of dreams. In his attempt to arrange everything in his favour, the defendant piles up contradictory arguments: 1. The kettle I am returning to you is brand new; 2. The holes were already in it when you lent it to me; 3. You never lent me a kettle anyway." See Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 110–1.

²⁴ She was unreliable on such historical matters. Toril Moi proposes a number of reasons why Beauvoir was intensely invested in stressing her intellectual and personal debt to Sartre. Tidd agrees that it seems to have satisfied a number of fantasies. See Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), and Tidd's *Beauvoir: Gender and Testimony*, 38.

²⁵ Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 94. Tidd proposes that "this 'revelation' provoked by Sartre appears, for several reasons, to be an autobiographical device. It implies that Beauvoir was unaware of the role of gender in the constitution of situation, which is incorrect" (Tidd, *Beauvoir: Gender and Testimony*, 37).

²⁶ Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 94–5.

the project and left for the United States in January 1947,²⁷ following which she described her dissatisfied return to her earlier notes, and interrupted the project to write *America Day by Day*. By the time she returned to *The Second Sex* in 1948 Beauvoir had thoroughly rerouted her interest from a personal to a social analysis, apparently in the context of recording “America.”

“THE SOCIAL”

The circumstances of reflecting on another country prompted Beauvoir to offer an analysis of a category deemed “society” without problematizing the methodology the analysis presupposed.²⁸ She adopted the format of a travel journal, yet compare *America Day by Day* to the interrogation of methodological questions seen in her philosophical essays, published in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, *Existentialisme et la sagesse des nations*, and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, as well as in her discussions of her approach to her novels and novellas.²⁹ The existentialist criteria make only a minor appearance in the travel narrative, except in comments about the failure to understand oneself as responsible, as when we are told of American youths enclosed in complacent resignation.³⁰

Mary McCarthy noticed the peculiarity of *America Day by Day*’s methodology. Despite her intellectual differences with Beauvoir, it isn’t the existentialist perspective that McCarthy protests, so much as the reprehensible naiveté of the social commentator. She is provoked by (and the *New Yorker*

²⁷ In addition to the unreliable account of the genesis of the project offered in *Force of Circumstance*, and *The New Yorker* record in February 1947 that her next project was to be on women, a letter to Algren following her return to France mentioned getting back to what she had written six months earlier on women, before her first visit to America. See letters of May 24, 1947, and letters of June 6, 1947, Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 19, 26.

²⁸ Tidd and Simons argue that Beauvoir was influenced by the social realism of both Wright and Algren, in addition to the sociology of Gunnar and Alva Myrdal. If so, it is a social realism whose presuppositions she appears to accept uncritically.

²⁹ See Chapter 1 for the discussion between Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir, and others on the advantages and traps of the metaphysical novel.

³⁰ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 143. The minimal appeal to the language of existentialism does not reflect a move away from her affiliation with it, though it may reflect a broadening to include social realism. All of her talks in America were on the topic of existentialism: in a representative piece published in *The New York Times Magazine* in May 1947, she declares that she is an existentialist and that her reflections on America emerge from that position. Beauvoir is readily self-identifying as existentialist in her letter to Algren of June 20, 1947. See Beauvoir, “An Existentialist Looks At Americans,” *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004) 307–15, and Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 33.

was also struck by³¹) Beauvoir's occasionally gushing enthusiasm – she is as “eager as a little girl to taste the rock candy delights of this materialistic moon civilization (the orange juice, the ice-creams, the jazz, the whiskeys, the martinis, and the lobster . . .)”³² – and the extent to which Beauvoir wants to confirm that the America of her imagination is really there.³³ What disturbs McCarthy is Beauvoir's uncritical reception and transmission of her own impressions and of the information she accesses: “What is more pathetic is her credulity . . . she is so eager to appear well informed that she believes anything anybody tells her, especially if it is anti-American and pretends to reveal the inner workings of the capitalist mechanism.”³⁴

McCarthy's protest neglects a matter of equal credulity: Beauvoir's uncritical understanding of the travel narrative as literary form.³⁵ Someone more interested than McCarthy in the specifics of Beauvoir's trajectory (and her previously self-conscious methodology) might have been all the more struck by the oddity of the *America Day by Day* project. The questions of form that had earlier preoccupied Beauvoir vanish and she supposes that methodological problems are not hers insofar as she undertakes what she apparently understands to be the simple project of recounting her travel experiences. Inasmuch as Beauvoir's work is informed by the illusory transparency of what René Etiemble would later ironize as “You took a trip there, you described quite simply what you saw”³⁶ the work fell short of her intentions as she had described them to Algren: “I shall speak of America, but about myself, too; I should like to describe the whole experience of ‘myself-in-America’ altogether; what means arrival and departure and

³¹ *The New Yorker's* “Talk of the Town” depicts her jubilant enthusiasm in her tourism with a more forgiving condescension; she is “as pleased as a Midwesterner with the two weeks she spent in New York,” 19.

³² Mary McCarthy, “Mlle. Gulliver en Amérique,” *The Humanist in the Bathtub* (New York: Signet/New American Library, 1964), 20–7, 21.

³³ “[S]he does not wish to know America but only to ascertain that it is there, just as she had imagined it,” McCarthy, “Mlle. Gulliver en Amérique,” 22.

³⁴ “A Spanish painter assures her that in America you have to hire a press agent to get your paintings shown. An author tells her that in America literary magazines print only favorable reviews. A student tells her that in America private colleges pay better salaries than state universities” (McCarthy, “Mlle. Gulliver en Amérique,” 23).

³⁵ Compare, for example, René Etiemble's similarly stinging response to Beauvoir's 1957 *La Longue marche*, and the traveller's credulity in the face of received information: “What is exactly *The Long March*? China from day to day? A travelogue? A journalistic report?” (Etiemble, “Simone de Beauvoir, the Concrete Mandarin,” in *Critical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Elaine Marks (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co, 1987), 58–76, 61.

³⁶ Etiemble, “Simone de Beauvoir, the Concrete Mandarin,” 58.

passing by, and the attempt to look at things, to get something of them and so on. And at the same time I'll try to get the things themselves."³⁷

Beauvoir acknowledges that getting to the "things themselves" is no simple matter, nor is describing the synthesis that is "herself-in-America."³⁸ But the passages that describe "America" usually don't (as McCarthy notes) accomplish a cautious awareness that the "America" depicted by Beauvoir is more than a matter of "myself." Beauvoir doesn't engage with, or succeed in making interesting, the intertwined relationship of these evocations; rather, the book veers from the one to the other, either seeming unreliable about America, or overly self-involved.³⁹

Beauvoir's methodology is simplistic,⁴⁰ but the stance she adopted was more complex in at least one respect. A methodological shift is evident in her very supposition of a category "the social" with conditions, constraints, and incitements to be analyzed.⁴¹ "The social" is above all deemed to have a causal relationship with American subjectivities. American society – more specifically the class relations relating to American capitalism – is held responsible for the beliefs and attitudes of its individuals.⁴²

³⁷ Letter of June 6, 1947, Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 26.

³⁸ She had recently read Husserl and probably has in mind describing America in terms of the ways it was "given" to her. Commentators on the influence of phenomenology in Beauvoir include Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

³⁹ Beauvoir's literary production is mixed in quality. Much of the material in her earlier autobiographies and in *The Second Sex*, for example, can be reflective, incisive, and very moving, as is *A Very Easy Death*. Her travel narratives are not her strongest writing, nor is her one play.

⁴⁰ Compare also to Sartre's essay "Individualisme et conformisme" (1945), similarly written after a six-week visit to the United States, and similarly preoccupied with the problem of the relevance of his impressions. He admits the visit is brief, "*Je décide donc de livrer mes impressions et mes constructions personnelles, sous ma propre responsabilité. Cette Amérique peut-être que je rêve. En tous cas je serai honnête avec mon rêve: je l'exposerai tel que le fais*" (Sartre, "Individualisme et conformisme," *Situations, III Lendemain de guerre* [Paris: Gallimard, 1949], 75–91).

⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty articulates the problem (though it is not one he attributes to her) in his discussion of her literature: "Not only do we not know the truth of the drama, but there is no truth – no other side of things where true and false, fair and unfair are separated out. We are inextricably and confusedly bound up with the world and with others" (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Metaphysics and the Novel," *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964) 26–40, 36).

⁴² McCarthy also saw Beauvoir as having "preserved" a certain amount of Marxism in some of Beauvoir's reactions to American privilege and the "Pullman" class. The ambivalence of Sartre and Beauvoir with respect to both historical materialist analysis and membership of the French communist party is well known. Still, as Beauvoir notes in *The Prime of Life*, she and Sartre also supposed capitalism to be a doomed form of social and economic organization, and there is a default hostility to it manifest in her writing. As Beauvoir writes of this period in their thought, "We wanted the defeat of capitalism, but not the accession of a socialist society which, we thought, would have deprived us of our liberty" (Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 5).

Prior to her arrival in the United States, there had been specific reasons for Beauvoir's aversion to forms of "social analysis." She claimed that holding social conditions responsible for the individual case prompted distraction from the importance of subjective responsibility. These are the terms in which, in her autobiographies, Beauvoir discusses the reservations she had about Marxism. She attributes to Marxism, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, the view that the human will is "the reflection of objective conditions by which the situation of the class or the people under consideration is defined . . . revolt, need, hope, rejection, and desire are only the resultants of external forces." And she responds: "that is the essential point on which existentialist ontology is opposed to dialectical materialism. We think that the meaning of the situation does not impose itself on the consciousness of a passive subject, that it surges up only by the disclosure which a free subject effects in his project."⁴³

By the time Beauvoir came to recount her experiences in America, she appealed to the supposition against which she had previously prevailed, that group and individual consciousness can most usefully be explained by reference to their social conditions, which act to limit, provoke, incite, or constrain. She refers to mystification,⁴⁴ which is not explained, justified, or problematized as a category: it arrives on the scene as something one might observe almost as neutrally as (Beauvoir thinks) one can observe the habits of dress and diet.

As a result, when Beauvoir makes intermittent references in *America Day by Day* to responsibility, the subsequent *Second Sex's* tension between holding the forces of society responsible for the mystification of its members, yet half reproaching those same members for failing to take individual responsibility with regard to the coercions of society, is already in operation. These tendencies had already been faintly apparent in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and they would continue to pull against each other rhetorically through a considerable amount of Beauvoir's work. Methodologically, the question is whether the existentialist preoccupation with individual responsibility can coexist with some kind of Marxist analysis, minimally a language of mystification and an attunement to class relations as explanatory, and a concept of "the social" as a force deemed capable of inciting desires, expectations, subjective capacities, inhibitions, and "false" beliefs.

⁴³ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 19–20, 20.

⁴⁴ Beauvoir, *L'Amérique au jour le jour 1947*, 405, 407. *Mystification* has been translated as duplicity in Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 292 and 294. Beauvoir does refer once to the phenomenon of mystification in *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 85.

The appearance of this particular theory cohabitation in Beauvoir's work is problematic but unsurprising. Despite their reservations, Beauvoir and Sartre's sympathies were with Marxist politics,⁴⁵ and the problem for both would prove to be how, not whether to reconcile the early Marx with existentialism. Sartre himself would soon,⁴⁶ and particularly in 1960 in *A Critique of Dialectical Reason*, attempt a deliberate and elaborate cohabiting or reconciliation of Marxism and existentialism.⁴⁷ Also, from 1941 onward, Beauvoir was expressing dissatisfaction with her work to date when she considered the philosophical thematics informing her novels. In that year, between the publication of *The Blood of Others* and *She Came to Stay*, she wrote that the latter already "relies on [*repose sur*] a philosophical attitude that no longer belongs to me. The next [novel] will be on the *individual situation*, its moral significance and its relationship [*rapport*] with the social [*le social*]." ⁴⁸ What means were available to Beauvoir for a conceptualization of the latter? Around the period of *The Blood of Others*

⁴⁵ In *The Prime of Life*, Beauvoir describes the theory of surplus value as a revelation during her first readings of *Capital* (Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 58).

⁴⁶ After "Materialism and Revolution," in which Sartre had offered a critique of dialectical materialism and analyzed the relationship between revolution and Sartrean freedom in 1946, he discussed his relationship to Marxism further in essays published between 1952 and 1954 (translated in English in Sartre, *The Communists and Peace with an answer to Claude Lefort*, trans. Irene Clephane [London: Hamish Hamilton, 1969]), and again in the long methodological essay written in 1957, published as the first essay in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in 1960 but published separately in English as Sartre, *Search For A Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Vintage, 1968).

⁴⁷ While Beauvoir wrote *America Day by Day*, Sartre had, of course, been wrestling with the parallel problem. An orientation toward the phenomenon of racism as embedded in social relations is evident both in Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*, written in 1944 and published in 1946, and in essays written by Sartre in response to his own trip to America; see Sartre, "Ce que j'ai appris du problème noir," *Le Figaro* (Paris: June 16, 1945), 2, and Sartre, "Le problème noir aux Etats-unis," *Le Figaro* (Paris: July 3, 1945). Thomas Flynn identifies Sartre's first serious attempt to integrate (notwithstanding the ensuing problems) social analysis with existentialism in the reference to a social "system" in his writings on colonialism and Algeria. Flynn likens these to Marx's comments in the first edition of *Capital* that insofar as the capitalist individual is the creature of economic relations, she or he is not individually responsible for them. *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Flynn points out, still bears the preoccupation with bad faith. But Sartre "sees a necessity written into colonialism that, once set into motion, operates independently of its agents' intentions. Thus, in 'Colonialism is a System' he explains . . . 'the purest intention, if it is born in this infernal system, dies immediately. For it is not true that there are good settlers and others who are wicked; there are settlers, that's all.' . . . This immediately plunges us into a major dilemma of Marxist social thought, one especially painful for an existential libertarian like Sartre, namely, the reconciliation of responsibility and freedom with historical and social determinism" (Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism: The Test-Case of Collective Responsibility* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1984], 58). Also see Sartre, "Le colonialisme est un système," *Situations III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949). On the other hand, consider Alain Badiou's assessment: "la marxisme est pour [Sartre] le discours organisé de l'activité collective du prolétariat. Ce ne sera jamais une science des lois sociales: cela en ferait une théorie de la passivité" (Badiou, *Jean-Paul Sartre* [Marseille: Editions Potemkine, 1980], 6).

⁴⁸ Entry of Jan. 21, 1941, Beauvoir, *Journal de guerre Septembre 1939-janvier 1941*, 363.

she visualized the social as the collectivity of interconnecting, individually confronting, competing consciousnesses, each of which places a moral responsibility on the other⁴⁹; but there is little sign of ideas about ideology. The social is the conglomerate of individual responsibilities, and it is considered as the domain of ethics, not “mystification.” In *The Blood of Others*, the crisis confronted by the protagonist Blomart concerns his impact on other humans. Others die from his actions, suffer, fall in love with him. Confronted with a woman who seeks a relationship with him:

“I didn’t want you to be unhappy.”

“And if I prefer to be unhappy? It’s for me to choose.”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s for you to choose.”⁵⁰

This is the moral struggle of the book: one affects the happiness or lives of other humans, and (according to the novel’s perspective) one cannot *not* affect others. Sartre’s point that one cannot not choose⁵¹ is transformed by Beauvoir into the moral implications of one’s inability not to affect others through one’s activity or passivity, acquiescence or resistance. Loving or rejecting her, Blomart can’t choose not to impact on Hélène and others.⁵² Beauvoir may well also consider that Blomart and Hélène are the product of bourgeois upbringing, but her interest in “the social” is not of that persuasion; rather, she underlines the often intolerable nature of the mutual impact of individually choosing existents on each other.

⁴⁹ Thus she is already at odds with the early Sartrean perspective, and Sartre’s own interest in analyzing social conditions is seen immediately following the 1943 publication of *Being and Nothingness*, where he turns his attention to a more comprehensive analysis of anti-Semitism in *Anti-Semite and Jew*. See also Sartre, “Materialism and Revolution,” *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, trans. Annette Michelson (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 198–256.

⁵⁰ Beauvoir, *The Blood of Others*, trans. Roger Senhouse and Yvonne Moyse (New York: Bantam, 1974), 112–3.

⁵¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay of Ontology* (New York: Washington Square Press, Pocket Books, 1966), 710.

⁵² Each subject is depicted as choosing, yet these are also choices made (as Beauvoir emphasizes in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* of 1944) that affect others insofar as they contribute to the situation in relation to which the other is an upsurge of choice. On the one hand, Beauvoir claims in the 1944 work that we can do nothing for or against others, 124. On the other hand, she modifies this position in one critical respect: “each of my actions by falling into the world creates a new situation for [the other]. I must assume these actions” (Beauvoir, “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons [Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004], 90–149, 126). Beauvoir likely has the same proposal in mind when she argues in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that her ethics are not individualistic since one’s freedom “can be achieved only through the freedom of others” (Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 156).

EXISTENTIALISM AND "THE SOCIAL"

By the time of writing *America Day by Day*, Beauvoir was therefore drawing concurrently on Marxist language, an existentialist perspective, and some kind of social analysis. Given the absence of reflection on the methodology (a reflection from which she likely takes herself to be exempt in a retrospective travel diary), Beauvoir doesn't ask whether these perspectives, with their specific concerns and languages, can be combined. Thus, on the one hand, Beauvoir attributes to "America" the absence of a sense of individual responsibility. But, concurrently, she supposes that individuals, their beliefs and presuppositions, can be considered a product of the ideology and mystification to which they are subject.⁵³ She describes workers, African Americans, academics, and women as products of an American milieu explaining their lack of a sense of purpose and will. "Neither a person's education nor the setting in which one is raised is designed to reveal one's inner life [*son intériorité*] to oneself. . . . Society hems one in from childhood. One learns to look outside oneself, at others, for a model of behavior; this is the source of what we call 'American conformism.'"⁵⁴

American character or personality is a product of its environment in the sense that the "majority of Americans" are described as letting "their lives go round in the same circle"; having no taste for, sense or understanding of individual fate (*destin*) nor collective life;⁵⁵ believing in abstract idols, values or cult objects (money, women, good, evil); fearing solitude. Beauvoir's enthusiasm for describing a purported national character accelerates, and the differences among Americans (differences that she elsewhere accentuates) are downplayed:

They are open and welcoming, they are capable of tenderness, passion, sentimentality, and cordiality, but they rarely know how to build a deep love or a lasting friendship. They are far from heartless, yet their relations remain superficial or cold. They are far from lacking vitality, spirit [*élan*], and generosity, yet they don't know how to devote themselves [*se donner à*] to the project of their lives [*l'entreprise de leur vie*].⁵⁶

An onslaught of attitudes from "society" produces echoing attitudes in the "individual."⁵⁷ She argues that Americans won't be able to change

⁵³ See note 47. ⁵⁴ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 384, trans. mod.

⁵⁵ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 383. ⁵⁶ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 386.

⁵⁷ On the whole, she is referring to attitudes, beliefs, will, motivation. One reference to embodiment occurs in a discussion of the physical exhaustion of taxi drivers and housewives, the high rate of

individually, and in particular, “give concrete content to that abstract entity: one’s freedom” (in other words, “fill this empty freedom”), until they “change the political and social conditions in which they live and these are, precisely, what control [*commandent*] their inertia,”⁵⁸ the great majority of Americans being “victims of this mechanism [*machinerie*].”⁵⁹ Her discussion of the passivity and incapacity of the “masses” (*les masses*) goes so far as to suggest that their conditions leave no possibility for the affirmation of freedom. The masses are “inert,” “deprived of any form of means of action [*dépourvu de tout instrument d’action*]”:

This passivity can be explained by the whole history of America. Immigration has led to a heterogeneity of cultures that is not conducive to collective consciousness [*la prise de conscience collective*]. The existence of open frontiers and the opportunities offered to each citizen drew [*drainaient*] immigrants toward the realization of individual goals, and social instability constantly pulled their leaders out of the inferior classes. As a result, in today’s rigidified society, the masses remain divided, inorganic, without any sense of solidarity – and therefore passive, impressionable.⁶⁰

A transition has occurred from the Beauvoir of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, who in certain passages still stresses ineluctable human freedom in all circumstances (and distances herself from the Marxist perspective in this respect).⁶¹ In *America Day by Day*, the existentialist perspective reappears, but there is an unidentified alteration in the role the existentialist perspective plays. The above passage provides an example. One page earlier, we find Beauvoir defending the familiar existential freedom. She reminds us that every human conscious awareness is a form of transcendence. Activity and passivity are both forms of transcendence, she reminds her reader, and the puzzle is to understand why an individual might choose passivity as a form of transcendence. Although this appears to conflict with the cited passage, Beauvoir is selective concerning the groups of individuals at whom she directs her analyses. The object of her reminder that even passivity is a form of transcendence isn’t the masses, it is the intellectuals of America: “Because, from my point of view, any conscious grasp of the situation [*toute prise de conscience de la situation*] is a way of getting beyond it [*en étant un dépassement*], I would like to know why American intellectuals have chosen this particular way of getting past it – namely, passivity [*ont choisi ce mode de dépassement-ci, à savoir la passivité*].”⁶²

heart disease in Americans more generally, and the alcoholism that she deems explicable when life “exhausts itself just to survive [*s’épuise à maintenir*],” Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 383.

⁵⁸ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 387, trans. mod. ⁵⁹ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 388.

⁶⁰ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 348. ⁶¹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 19–20.

⁶² Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 347.

In a consistent though unspoken tactic, the existentialist analysis and terminology that had previously in Beauvoir's work been directed at human existents generally,⁶³ has now been targeted only at certain groups of individuals, those characterized by social or economic privilege.⁶⁴

Another instance of Beauvoir's selectivity with respect to the individuals at whom she directs her analyses is seen in her discussion of bad faith. The term is directed largely at those who profit from others. Racism is depicted as a form of bad faith, but the victim's possible complicity with racism's mystification (a phenomenon depicted at length by Richard Wright, for example, an important reference for Beauvoir at this time⁶⁵) is less of interest to her. She does depict certain groups of individuals as passive, living in the moment, lacking a sense of individual responsibility⁶⁶; but if they are exploited groups (such as African Americans and poor workers), Beauvoir does not judge their possible bad faith. In one passage she says that the underprivileged in America:

don't know how to invent a unique future [*un avenir singulier*] for themselves in the steel world in which they are merely cogs in the machine. They have no project, passion, nostalgia, or hope that engages them beyond the present [*ni espoir qui les engage au-delà du présent*]; they know only the indefinite repetition of the

⁶³ Although *The Ethics of Ambiguity* does mention that those who have not had an "apprenticeship of freedom," such as slaves and women in particularly infantilizing environments, may "have no instrument, be it in thought or by astonishment or anger, which permits them to attack the civilization which oppresses them" (Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 37–8). On this, see Gail Weiss, "Challenging Choices: An Ethics of Oppression," in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, ed. Simons. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 241–61. Weiss discusses extreme cases in which one might so lack lucidity that what is requisite even for the radical concept of freedom is not present. Beauvoir, she argues, "sets the stage for an alternative conception of morality," 243. She anticipates the question "if choice and freedom do not provide the foundation for the moral existence of the severely oppressed, what does?" Her suggestion, "it is the ability to enter into relations with others that precedes choice and provides the necessary grounding for a moral life. Focusing on relations with others, rather than choices, allows us to see moral failures as failures of *relation*," 255. Weiss locates in Beauvoir's work a movement, albeit conflicted, in the direction of this view.

⁶⁴ Examples provided are American intellectuals and college students.

⁶⁵ *Black Boy* describes the narrator's frustration with African Americans who personify race stereotypes either out of economic or survival need, or by force of habit (Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth* [New York: Perennial Classics, 1998]).

⁶⁶ Thus consider her description of "*la situation des noirs et de «pauvres blancs» qui se sont infiltrés parmi eux est des plus tragiques. Ils vivent non seulement dans la misère, mais dans l'insécurité, et dans l'ignorance, la passivité, le manque d'hygiène*" (Beauvoir, *L'Amérique au jour le jour*, 297; *America Day by Day*, 211). Note, however, that while Beauvoir describes this incited passivity, she also describes a deceptive docility that conceals revolt: "*Derrière tous ces visages dociles, à travers le découragement, la peur ou plus rarement dans l'espoir, la révolte est toujours en éveil. Et les blancs le savent*" (*L'Amérique au jour le jour*, 324; *America Day by Day*, 234).

cycle of the hours and seasons. But cut off from the past and future, the present no longer has any substance; it's nothing, just a pure, empty now.⁶⁷

Here and elsewhere, Beauvoir describes African Americans and poor workers who consider themselves passive cogs. According to the concept of freedom with which she has previously aligned herself, every individual is ineluctably a freely choosing individual engaged in a project.⁶⁸ It had until this point in her work been claimed that almost all existents are necessarily aware of themselves as “more” than passive, and necessarily “choosing” (in a specific and technical sense) passivity.⁶⁹ Now a selective application of Beauvoir's existentialism exposes the bad faith of those who profit from others, rather than those from whom others profit.

THE BAD FAITH OF RACISM

A similar strategy was adopted by Sartre in his *Anti-Semite and Jew*, discussing anti-Semitic attempts to fix Jews as a degraded identity. He considers the likely objection: “the Jew is free, he can choose to be authentic,”⁷⁰ only so as to respond, “That is true, but we must understand first of all that *that does not concern us* [*cela ne nous regarde pas*]. The prisoner is always free to run away, if it is clearly understood that he risks death in crawling under the barbed wire. Is his jailor any less guilty on that account?”⁷¹

Here, the object of Sartre's attention is the bad faith of the anti-Semite. Technically we are all free but, suggests Sartre, in the case of oppression, or material deprivation of liberty, the choices made by the victim “*ne nous regarde pas*”: it is the jailor's bad faith that should preoccupy us.⁷²

⁶⁷ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 266. I take up in [Chapter 3](#) Beauvoir's interest in connections between exploitation and an impoverished temporality.

⁶⁸ Despite the claims that in choosing for myself, I do contribute to the other's situation, which will provide the context for his or her freedom (*Pyrrhus and Cineas*) and the denunciation of oppression (*Ethics of Ambiguity*, 156), both these works stress nonetheless the well-known “radical” concept of freedom.

⁶⁹ An exception occurring in *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 38.

⁷⁰ In fact, the argument that Sartre himself had proposed in 1943 in *Being and Nothingness*, 677.

⁷¹ Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 136.

⁷² Sartre would persevere with analyses of the contradictions of racism later in his 1960 work, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*: “American plantation owners in the seventeenth century refused to raise black children in the Christian faith, so as to keep the right to treat them as sub-human, which was an implicit recognition that they were *already* men: they evidently differed from their masters only in lacking a religious faith, and the care their masters took to keep it from them was a recognition of their capacity to acquire it. In fact, the most insulting command must be addressed by one man to another; the master must have faith in man in the person of his slaves. This is the contradiction of racism, colonialism and all forms of tyranny: in order to *treat a man like a dog*, one must first

Does *America Day by Day* similarly deploy this strategically aimed analysis? Does it modify more thoroughly the concept of radical freedom? Perhaps, as Beauvoir had briefly intimated in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, an individual requires a minimum of social recognition and economic equality in order to be usefully described in terms of the concept of radical freedom.⁷³ Or perhaps Beauvoir simply thinks that a theorist who subjects the victim to an evaluating judgment has been inappropriately sidetracked. Where criticisms are to be made, she prefers to direct the scrutiny of existential analysis at those who benefit from privilege.

This strategy produces Beauvoir's analysis of the bad faith of racism. Freedom, she argues in this context, is a matter of mystification in America. Paul Robeson's recital is banned because he is accused of communist sympathies, but a white bus driver briefly becomes a popular hero after he spontaneously abandons his New York bus route, and hits the road for Florida in the city's bus. This is trumpeted as a sign of American individuality, originality, and love of liberty; Robeson's real or imagined communism is not.⁷⁴ Public discourse manipulates two values (individual liberty and the "general interest") in alternation so as to consistently exclude marginalized groups. Individual liberty is not invoked as a principle to protect an individual who is fired from the public service because of suspected communist leanings. Yet it is invoked to protect the rights of the private administrations that subsequently refuse to hire him. The individual is deemed free to be communist, thereby finding that he is free to starve from unemployment. Individual liberty is not invoked to protect the right to strike. It is invoked to protect the right to victimize in "private" contexts, as when the owner of a public swimming pool in Baltimore has the right to ban Jews. A man freely asks for entry, is freely denied it, freely writes a letter of protest, much free debate accordingly ensues, and a resulting newspaper editorial will (unironically) celebrate this example of American liberty.⁷⁵ Beauvoir points out that Americans have never demanded (*réclamé*) actual economic equality – just the hypothetical possibility for an individual to change his or her economic sphere.⁷⁶ Respect for a mythical equality is such, she notes, that it is entrusted to the world of ideals while a grotesquely unequal reality is accepted. The likelihood of most individuals (particularly the

recognize him as a man" (Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith [London: Verso, 1976], III).

⁷³ According to this concept, freedom is to be equated with the inescapable, implicit interpretation of the world that for each subject is constantly at work.

⁷⁴ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 291.

⁷⁵ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 292–3.

⁷⁶ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 294.

American underclass) becoming “self-made” is akin to the likelihood of winning the lottery. Yet the belief in the possibility of becoming self-made is not thereby weakened. Though freedom is confirmed only within strict parameters, “freedom’s” mystique is not lessened.

In the most extensive discussion of racism in *America Day by Day*, her depictions of race relations in America blur with her discussion of Gunnar Myrdal’s⁷⁷ analysis of them. To the methodological and theoretical web out of which Beauvoir’s responses to America are composed (existentialism, Marxism, the analysis of “the social” or of “mystification,” the devices of the diarist, an apparently naïve stance of “recording impressions”) must be added the theoretical approach to race relations most obviously located in the work of Myrdal’s *American Dilemma*.

Her reference to that work occurs at almost the only point in *America Day by Day* at which Beauvoir expresses caution about her ability to describe America, using this reserve as an explanation for her appeal to Myrdal.⁷⁸ She appropriates Myrdal’s analysis of racist rhetoric as constitutively contradictory. America’s unequal race relations and slave history conflict with its creed, yet both are so integral to what has become valued as “American,” that restructuring (economic, and reconstruction of America’s imaginary identity or self-understanding) is a national dilemma.

Inspired by Myrdal’s emphasis on the contradictory nature of racism, Beauvoir, shocked by segregation in America, is prompted to a detailed discussion of the tendency of racist rhetoric to call attention to its own inconsistency. Racism undermines itself conceptually, though this does nothing to undermine its poisonous efficacy.⁷⁹ Whites could consider

⁷⁷ Myrdal, a Swedish sociologist who had served as an economic government advisor, was employed by the Carnegie Corporation to undertake a study of American race relations over a period of several years. As a white, distinguished, visiting social scientist, he was supposed to bring an impartial perspective. Myrdal’s opening pages made clear that he did not understand his analysis so neutrally, depicting the complex feelings the country had provoked in him and stressing that “*things look different, depending upon where you stand*”; see Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1944), xviii.

⁷⁸ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 236.

⁷⁹ Myrdal appears to have disagreed – he suggested that an increasing realization was possible with respect to one’s “sphere of valuations” (“the entire aggregate of a person’s numerous and conflicting valuations, as well as their expressions in thought, speech and behaviour”). He suggests of their contradictory form, or as he says a “valuation conflict,” that “the feeling of need for logical consistency” is a “rather new phenomenon,” describing a “process of growing intellectualization” through which “people’s awareness of inconsistencies in their own spheres of valuation tend to be enhanced. At the same time – if moral cynicism does not spread – . . . they are increasingly reconditioned to demand consistency in their own valuations and, particularly, in those of other people.” Myrdal acknowledges that this is a slow process, but that the “perspective of decades and generations . . . yields a more optimistic impression” (Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 1028–30).

blacks contaminating, while being fed and cleaned by them; they could abuse black women sexually while decrying interracial sex; they could accuse blacks of an inferior moral sense while stimulating their criminality.⁸⁰ They discouraged or prohibited blacks from voting through elaborate measures and then accused them of being politically apathetic; they decried their inferiority while denying them education and opportunities. They claimed blacks needed little to live while implying their lives were preferable. Beauvoir referred to white Americans of the 1940s who could pride themselves on their race egalitarianism yet still resist white women of their acquaintance or family associating socially or sexually with African Americans. Those who supported an “equal but different” argument in the guise of liberalism did so conditionally – when equivalent social benefits would be too expensive, “equal but different” became, she argued, an alibi for unequal distribution of resources.⁸¹

Beauvoir’s point that racism profits and proliferates through contradictory and self-undermining positions – combined with her depiction of racism as temporally fluid, a “situation which evolves” – gave her an account not only of the “other” – people of color and (as she would argue in *The Second Sex*) women – as divided from themselves, but also of the racist, and racism itself (in *The Second Sex*, she would also briefly argue this of men) as self-divided, founded in conflicting aims and viewpoints.

It was in the midst of her first analysis of racism that Beauvoir offered her first explication of the distinction between being and becoming as it applies to embodied subjectivity, a formulation that would later become famous through its redeployment as the statement that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”⁸² in *The Second Sex*. Thinking about our constitution as raced individuals, white, African American or otherwise, she asks, “but what does the verb ‘to be’ mean? Does it define an immutable essence, like oxygen? Or does it describe a moment in a situation that *has evolved*, like every human situation?”⁸³ Denied equal educational resources, African Americans had been described as uncultivated, in another instance of racism’s bad faith. Wasn’t the reproach precisely that they have not “become” cultivated? Isn’t this reproach, she continues, a recognition that capacities are not immutable or essential, but a result of circumstances with

⁸⁰ So long as the crime is not directed against whites.

⁸¹ These arguments are to be found in Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 239–46.

⁸² “*On ne naît pas femme, on le devient*” (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US267; UK295; FrII13.)

⁸³ “*Mais que signifie le verbe être: définit-il une nature immuable comme celle de l’oxygène? ou décrit-il le moment d’une situation qui est devenue, comme toute situation humaine?*” (Beauvoir, *Amérique au jour le jour*, 331; *America Day by Day*, 239).

which the racist has everything to do, but whose responsibility is disavowed? But Beauvoir also described forms of subordination suspended across time, rather than punctual, and suspended across ideas and the negation of those ideas. Sex and race othering and vilification were described as forms of becoming, the men, women, whites, and blacks intertwined and incited by these formations, enfolding ideas that twisted against themselves. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir would amplify this idea, stressing repeatedly that women “became” through formations dividing them against themselves, and offering a powerful interpretation of a great deal of women’s lives in these terms. She thereby depicted women as self-thwarting, sapped by their resistance to themselves in addition to more obvious forms of sexual subordination. The dilemma, however, was that sexism, racism, and the whites and men who also “became” (racist and sexist) in such formations, seemed not, at least on her account, to be undermined by these contradictions.⁸⁴

THE IDEAL INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP

It was before Beauvoir’s interest in the contradictions of racist rhetoric that she had undertaken, and temporarily shelved, the earlier project on the analysis of women. The project had been inflected by the sense, conveyed in her journals, that being a woman was a personal matter; her disinterest in the feminist movement; and the absence of theoretical elements that would enable a political analysis of the marginalization of women as a group. This kind of dismissive preoccupation does not provide resources for a theoretical perspective on women’s situation. Beauvoir’s engagement with American racism, and particularly with the analysis of race relations offered by Wright, John Dollard, and Myrdal constituted, therefore, a decisive intervention into her reflections on relations between the sexes. Beauvoir’s theoretical gambit was that possible parallels between race and sex relations in the United States⁸⁵ could be developed into a full-length project on women. *American Dilemma* was written by an economic theorist

⁸⁴ Though an exception is certainly seen in *The Second Sex*’s argument that women’s equality will be to man’s benefit, and generally she thematizes the universal benefits of equality and reciprocal recognition.

⁸⁵ *An American Dilemma* included a five-page appendix, “A Parallel to the Negro Problem,” that was, according to Simons, written by Alva Myrdal, likening the condition of women to that of African Americans; see Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race and the Origins of Existentialism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 170. The appendix references Alva Myrdal, *Nation and Family: The Swedish Experiment in Democratic Family and Population Policy* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1941), which Beauvoir asks Algren to source for her (letter of Dec. 1, 1947,

who stressed the constitutive function of the social, but Beauvoir also supposes that Sartrean theory could remain an important element in this prospective fusion of race and sex analysis, in particular the Sartre of *Anti-Semite and Jew*.⁸⁶

As she was completing research for *America Day by Day*, the letters Beauvoir wrote to Algren repeatedly mention *An American Dilemma* along such lines. After returning to Paris on May 17, 1947, she writes to him, "I read all I had written six months ago about women. It does not look bad."⁸⁷ By the June 7 she has reconsidered: "I think I was wrong to try at once to write the book about women which I began before going to America – it is dead for me just now; I cannot begin again where I left just as if nothing had happened. I'll write it later on and now I want to write about my travel."⁸⁸ In preparation for the latter she undertakes research,⁸⁹ explaining to Algren in her uneven English:

I am reading the big book about Negroes, *American Dilemma*, and I am enthusiastic [sic] about it. The man is really clever; he knows and understands much. He speaks not only about Negro problem but about many other American problems, and I read it with passion. Would you like that I bring it to you in spring? If you had leisure enough to read it, you would be interested as I am, but it is a big piece. I enjoy touching the big thick book, and thinking I'll read it on for at least two

Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 112). The letter mentions Beauvoir's interest in this account of "interesting analogies," 113.

⁸⁶ The passage in *The Second Sex* fusing these ideas runs together the comment from Myrdal: "Just as in America the problem is not with blacks [*il n'y a pas de problème noir*], rather there is a white problem" (here, she adds the note: "cf Myrdall [sic], *American Dilemma*"); Sartre: "just as 'anti-semitism is not a Jewish problem; it is our problem'" [here she adds the note, "cf J. P. Sartre, *Reflexions sur la question juive*"]; and her analysis of women: "so the woman problem has always been a problem for men [*le problème de la femme a toujours été un problème d'hommes*]" (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US152; UK159; Fr1216). Note Sartre's assumption in *Anti-Semite and Jew* that the reader he is addressing is not Jewish. He attributes the comment in question to Wright: "Richard Wright, the Negro writer, said recently: 'There is no Negro problem in the United States, there is only a White problem.' In the same way, we must say that anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem; it is *our* problem" (Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 152). Beauvoir will also repeat the formulation in *La Vieillesse* with respect to the othering of the aged (Beauvoir, *Old Age*, trans. Patrick O'Brian [Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1977], 100).

⁸⁷ Letter of May 24, 1947, Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 19.

⁸⁸ Letter of June 6, 1947, Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 26.

⁸⁹ Though on the June 28, she mentions having promised a part of the book on women for a "New York magazine" who had paid her \$250, the same to be paid on its completion; and on July 3 she mentions that she is working on it, as the funds will be useful. On the Nov. 21, 1947, she mentions a five-page piece on American women promised to a Swedish magazine that must be written because the advance is spent (Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 38, 41, 105). These pieces are not recorded in Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier, *Les écrits de Simone de Beauvoir La vie-L'écriture. Textes inédits ou retrouvés* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979) and the letters don't indicate whether the pieces were completed.

weeks; you feel very intimate with a book when you hold it in your hands for such a long time, but you do not choose to do it with all of them.”⁹⁰

Beauvoir hadn't written a project of the scope and breadth of *American Dilemma*, and there was nothing in the writing projects she had undertaken up to that date, or in her previous reflections about her writing aims, to indicate that she had envisaged such a major project. In 1946 she had forecast a book on the “woman question,” but there is no indication that she imagined it otherwise than as parallel in scope to Sartre's short book on the “Jewish question” (as it was entitled),⁹¹ which had been published the previous year. The response to Myrdal is excited and identificatory. She is drawn to the breadth, multidisciplinary nature, and size of his project and she states her attraction to the idea of being the object of that kind of extended intimacy with the reader. She'd like to be Myrdal, so that someone else could give her the same kind of intimate attention.

One day later, she writes to Algren that in addition to finishing the book on America, she has finally returned to focus on the project on women. Size continues to preoccupy her: “Reading the *American Dilemma*, and my own little book about America being nearly over, I begin to think again about the other one, about women situation. I should like to write a book as important as this big one about Negroes. Myrdal points many very interesting analogies between Negroes' and women's status; I felt it already.”⁹²

She mentions the book with the same excitement in two more letters to Algren,⁹³ and then again at the end of December 1947: “The book *American Dilemma* is wonderful, you know. It teaches things not only about Negroes but about the whole America, and about European people too, about every kind of prejudice, bad faith, oppression, and so on.”⁹⁴

Three days later, she returns to the point she would also stress in *Force of Circumstance*: “*ma féminité ne m'avait gênée en rien.*”⁹⁵ But she has noted Myrdal's purported advantage as an external, neutral expert.⁹⁶ She seems to mimic the intellectual confidence such a stance could promise: “I came

⁹⁰ Letter of Dec. 1, Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 113.

⁹¹ The French title of Sartre's work being *Réflexions sur la question juive*.

⁹² Letter of Dec. 2, Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 113.

⁹³ “[V]ery, very interesting,” and “a wonderful book, I learnt a lot from it.” Again she suggests, “shall I bring it to you?” (letters of Dec. 6 and 18, 1947, Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 115 and 125).

⁹⁴ Letter of Dec. 30, 1947, Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 133.

⁹⁵ Beauvoir, *La Force des choses*, 135. Translated as “My femininity had never been irksome to me in any way” (Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 94).

⁹⁶ See note 79.

back to my essay about women. I told you, I never felt bad for being a woman, and sometimes I even enjoy it, as you know. Yet when I see other women around me, I think they have very peculiar problems and it would be interesting to look at what is peculiar in them.”⁹⁷

Beauvoir now writes as if the project on women has been entirely renewed: “I have a lot of reading to do: psychoanalysis, social science, law, history, and so on, but I like it,”⁹⁸ telling Algren of her pleasure at the prospect of extensive research.⁹⁹ Impressed with Myrdal’s comprehensive approach, she reports one week later that she has started to put in long days in at the Bibliothèque Nationale,¹⁰⁰ and six months later that she has been “reading thick books of biology and physiology and learning when you decided to be a man, when I chose to be a woman.”¹⁰¹

One of the characteristics of Myrdal that she wants to repeat is the combination of disciplines. The complex relationship to a multiplicity of theoretical languages (in her case, Sartrean, Marxist, sociological, race analysis, “transparent” recording) at work in *America Day by Day* would be greatly amplified in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir surveys a range of theoretical languages in order to assess their capacity to deal with the problem of women (historical materialism, psychoanalysis, biology, and so forth). Although they share an interdisciplinary method, Beauvoir and Myrdal take different approaches in this respect. When Beauvoir surveys a range of disciplines ostensibly to review what they have to say about women and their situation, her questions concern how the discourse of biology speaks of women but also what women’s biological limitations may in fact be. Similarly she investigates how women have appeared in historical discourse but also what their historical circumstances are. In other words, there is a redoubled interrogation at work as Beauvoir reviews the disciplines in question, as if one voice appeals to them as a source of facts, and an additional voice doubts whether these disciplines are adequate to the task of discussing the problematics of being a woman. Will biology serve

⁹⁷ Letter of Jan. 2, 1948, Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 135.

⁹⁸ Letter of Jan. 2, 1948, Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 135.

⁹⁹ “I like the idea of going to public libraries as when a student and reading, learning, and thinking about things I learn” (letter of Jan. 2, 1948, Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 135). She had previously spent long and apparently very reassuring days in 1940 under the Occupation at the Bibliothèque Nationale working her way through Hegel, described in Beauvoir, *Journal de guerre* and in Beauvoir, *Prime of Life*, entries of July 6 onward.

¹⁰⁰ Letter of Jan. 9, 1948, Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 138, and see her comment of Jan. 11, “I go on reading books about women . . . not very easy for women to behave properly, both with self-respect and enjoying themselves. Even now when they have so many rights,” 140.

¹⁰¹ Letter of July 26, 1948, Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair*, 204.

the purpose? Or psychoanalysis? Or historical materialism? One line of questioning interrogates the constraints to which women find themselves subject. A second line of questioning interrogates the disciplines and theoretical models depicting these constraints: are these explanatory models adequate, she asks? A third (sometimes more implicit) line of questioning explores the theoretical models and languages we draw on when we undertake the first and second lines of questioning. In other words, if we had to assess the viability of psychoanalysis, what methodology would we use in order to do so? For example, she uses existential language to evaluate the methodological adequacy of psychoanalysis. While critical of the latter, she also appeals to some of its findings. And a fourth level of complexity is produced from the intermeshing (sometimes clashing, sometimes harmonious) of the theoretical models at work.

In this, and in other respects, *The Second Sex* is entirely unlike *American Dilemma*. Though Beauvoir was influenced by Myrdal in her conceptualization of *The Second Sex*, his project includes extensive technical detail (statistics and summaries of studies undertaken in various scientific and social science domains), and the disciplines it intertwines (history, economics, sociology, geography) differ from those of Beauvoir. There is no philosophy in Myrdal's study, no close studies of literature, and neither historical materialist nor existentialist perspectives are reflected. African American culture is interpreted as the result of white oppression and is given minimal affirmation. Nor does his study exhibit interesting theoretical inconsistencies between the methodologies at work (sociology, history, economics). Perhaps *American Dilemma* is the more consistent work – its theoretical elements do not resist each other, but while the complexities of *The Second Sex* render it in some respects more unstable, these are powerful and effective levels of complication lacking in Myrdal's work, such as the challenge put to Marxism by psychoanalysis, to biology and sociology by existentialism, to biology by phenomenology, and even to Sartre by Merleau-Ponty.¹⁰²

¹⁰² On several occasions, Michèle Le Doeuff has found the work of philosophical women writers to be more textually open when compared to male philosophers with whose work the former align themselves. Le Doeuff's well-known paper *Long Hair, Short Ideas* compares system-building philosophy with other forms of philosophical writing such as the fragment. Although she focuses on the kind of writing women philosophers have favored historically, she comments about Pascal: "Here is a form of writing which does not claim to reconstruct and explain everything, which slides along the verge of the unthought, develops only by grafting itself on to another discourse, and consents to be its tributary [recognizing that] that 'I do not do everything on my own,' that I am a tributary to a collective discourse and knowledge which have done more towards producing me than I shall contribute in continuing to produce them . . . a recognition of the necessarily

Theoretically simple as the earlier *America Day by Day* was by comparison, two examples show how Beauvoir's method consisted, even there, of staging a context for theoretical cross-fertilization.

The first instance concerns the intersection of existentialism and Marxism, which in *America Day by Day* apparently takes the form of an argument that one can, and cannot, be rendered passive to such a point that freedom (in the ontological sense) is not possible. Again, the argument is not made overtly, instead being achieved through the intersection of those passages in which Beauvoir argues that even passivity is a form of transcendence or *prise de conscience de soi*, and those passages in which she claims that some individuals or groups are mystified and impoverished to the point that a *prise de conscience de soi* is not possible for them: what is required is a change in the overall material and economic conditions of society. The intersection of these two arguments occurs again in *The Second Sex*. At this point, an implicit suggestion, not made overtly, is that Marxism and existentialism can usefully speak to each other on the question of the conditions for a *prise de conscience de soi*. The very intersection of these respective languages amounts to this proposal.

The merging of these languages is again a gambit: can these languages either coexist or fruitfully be synthesized? If so, Beauvoir's point is that the work of Marx, Sartre, and herself are compatible or at least usefully in dialogue, and as such able to contribute to reflection concerning the conditions for adequate modes of subjectivity, embodiment, and freedom. If not, Beauvoir's project will be a tacit engagement with the inability of these languages to speak to each other (or accomplishes a tacit identification of the point at which they are no longer able to do so). This might be the point at which existentialism's awareness (of) consciousness cannot usefully be identified as a *prise de conscience de soi*. This is a form of consciousness that throughout Beauvoir's discussions of race, gender, and aging would continue to hold her attention. It is the point where the early existentialism of Sartre and Beauvoir reached its own limit, in its incapacity – in the context of the definition of freedom as the negativity of (what Sartre recoinced as

incomplete nature of all theorization." When Le Doeuff compares *The Second Sex* with Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, the former is described as the freer work in which we see an investigation "in process." Bringing an affirmative reading to the phenomenon, she suggests that "mutations of thought" may more readily take place in *The Second Sex* "without necessarily endangering its consistency of thought, since its notions have been made unsteady from the outset." See Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, trans. Colin Gordon (London: Athlone Press, 1988), 127; and Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.*, trans. Trista Selous (Oxford, U.K., and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991), 91.

non-thetic) pre-reflective spontaneous consciousness (or awareness of consciousness) – to discriminate meaningfully between qualitatively different modes of consciousness as gradations of freedom.¹⁰³

Beauvoir similarly takes herself to locate the relevant limit of Marxism. For one thing, she argues in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, “it appears evident to us that in order to adhere to Marxism, to enroll in a party, and . . . to be actively attached to it, even a Marxist needs a decision whose source is only in itself.”¹⁰⁴ And while Marxism’s strength is seen in its depiction of the material conditions for a *prise de conscience de soi*, in her view the concept posits, as an ideal, individuals being able to “fulfill themselves as a full positivity” under alternative conditions, a “dream” that Beauvoir argues is “not permitted since man is originally a negativity.”¹⁰⁵ In the face of existentialist definitional freedom-as-nothingness-at-the-heart-of-being, Beauvoir finds valuable Marx’s alternative view that “life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.”¹⁰⁶ But on her reading, Marxism’s weakness lies in its failure to fuse with its notion of ideology a conceptualization of the subject as constitutively divided by nothingness, in a sense not resolved by an eventual historical overcoming or completion or “definitive reconciliation” with oneself.¹⁰⁷ Surely such a subject-concept could be reconciled with a concept of ideology? Surely the incitement to passivity of subjects can be condemned, without installing an ideal of a self-determining, self-present, reflective ego as the origin of its acts, and without instating a conception of a terminal, fully realized subject who supersedes nothingness?¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Sonia Kruks is one of the first to have stressed that Beauvoir both introduces, as early as in her work *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, a difference between ontological freedom (which cannot be quantified) and a practical freedom, which can be, and allows for a greater stress on the importance of the latter in a consideration of the former than is seen in the work of the early Sartre; see Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence, Freedom, Subjectivity and Society* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990). This issue will relate to a problematic that “floats” in *The Second Sex*, and to which I will return, with respect to how severely to appraise the intermittent bad faith of women. Referencing it to Descartes, Sartre had discussed this distinction in “Cartesian Freedom,” see Sartre, “Cartesian Freedom,” in *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, trans. Annette Michelson (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 180–97.

¹⁰⁴ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 20. ¹⁰⁵ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 118.

¹⁰⁶ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology, Part One*, ed. C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), 47.

¹⁰⁷ See Beauvoir, “Moral Idealism and Political Realism,” trans. Anne Deing Cordero, *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 190.

¹⁰⁸ A variation of this debate is active today, as when Rae Langton and Catherine Mackinnon identify the capacity of patriarchal power to weaken the ability of a woman to have her “no” perform as a “no,” which could be considered a lack of agency and autonomy. Debate has turned over whether feminism can identify forces that weaken women’s capacity to accomplish speech acts they intend, without reinstalling what some would consider to be the myth of an autonomous

Through the definition of its constitutive negativity, Beauvoir questioned the myth of this subject-concept. She thought this myth could be challenged while one simultaneously challenges the forces of patriarchy acting to impinge on the autonomy of the subject. Is this a coherent position? Marxism, she argued, erred in depicting the subject too radically as the product of ideology and alienation. By its lights, human wills are “the reflection of objective conditions by which the situation of the class or the people under consideration is defined.”¹⁰⁹ On the one hand, Beauvoir considers that we do need an account of forces that incite individuals. On the other hand, subjectivity needs to be retheorized so that individuals are not considered only the product of social forces. She establishes this point through the alternating movements between the convictions of Marxism and existentialism. In her work, the confrontation of these theoretical elements constitutes a question: how can one retain the capacity to evaluate (as fused with historical and material conditions) the “quality” or habits of subjectivity, and in particular, thematize some kind of ideal of politically oriented “*prise de conscience*” (or a similar substitute) while retaining negativity, rather than positivity or self-presence as the referential definition of consciousness? This is an early example of Beauvoir’s implicit methodology in operation, and one to be seen again at length in *The Second Sex*.

Here is a second example of the operative resistance and theory intertwining in the early discussions of *America Day by Day*. Although Beauvoir attributes the recognition of racism’s bad faith to Myrdal, Myrdal never uses the term “bad faith.” Beauvoir draws together the Sartrean existentialism of *Being and Nothingness* and of her own *Ethics of Ambiguity*, the analyses of racism that she attributes to Myrdal with the language of bad faith that she has elsewhere attributed to Sartre, and discussed herself. The intersection of the terminologies supposes that the theoretical underpinnings of “bad faith” can usefully intersect with the analysis of racism and that these analyses can fruitfully be synthesized. The identification of self-contradiction – the analysis of bad faith as an idea combined with the contradiction of that idea – is used not just to interpret bad faith as self-undermining and self-exposing, but also racism itself.

If Beauvoir claims that racism is an expression of bad faith, the implication would be that it cannot be ignorant or unwitting. She draws from the

subject in a position to (in Langton’s formulation) “*speaking the actions she wants to.*” For this debate, see Langton, “Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22, no. 4 (1993): 293–330, 328; Catherine Mackinnon, *Only Words* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994); and Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁰⁹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 19.

bad faith terminology, from Myrdal's concept of the "American dilemma," and from her own detailed attention to the contradictions of racist rhetoric, a tacit argument that racism recognizes itself as such and recognizes what it denies. The term "bad faith" adds to the identification of racism's self-contradictions, describing a mechanism in which one's very denial of the other's freedom can only undermine itself and demonstrate the contrary.

Perhaps this presupposes Beauvoir's view that the judgment brought to those who deny their own freedom can be brought in parallel fashion to expressions of racism (and eventually, to expressions of sex bias). Certain details attributed to bad faith would be useful here. Bad faith is tacitly self-evidential: it cannot be entirely unaware of itself. The denial either of facticity or of freedom can't occur in oblivion of what it denies. Self-depiction as "not free" occurs as a sufficiently tacit expression of freedom as to occur in an implicit awareness, a so-called consciousness (of) freedom. Bad faith is bad faith (as opposed to thorough ignorance) because the act of denial is a confirmation of what is denied.¹¹⁰

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, this point is given one formulation in a discussion of the defeated "sub-man.":

No man is a datum which is passively suffered; the rejection of existence is still another way of existing; nobody can know the peace of the tomb while he is alive. He would like to forget himself, to be ignorant of himself, but the nothingness which is at the heart of man is also the consciousness that he has of himself.¹¹¹

This is a reference to the terminology shared with Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, according to which unawareness of the nothingness at the heart of being (and thus, unawareness of freedom) is impossible for such a being. We *must* be aware that we are free. In *Anti-Semite and Jew*, "anti-Semitism" is defined as a passion,¹¹² and, via Sartre's argument we have always "chosen" our passions (that is to say, we are always consciousness of

¹¹⁰ Sartre uses the formulation "(of)" to distinguish between consciousness and consciousness (of) consciousness. The former relates to an object of consciousness of which I am directly conscious. The latter relates to the tacit, so-called nonthetic or pre-reflective awareness that accompanies all consciousness. It is also considered a constant tacit awareness of freedom. Thus consciousness is considered always divided from itself, and always implicitly aware that freedom is at work in our experiences of the world and others. Sartre comments, "consciousness affects itself with bad faith. There must be an original intention and a project of bad faith; this project implies a comprehension of bad faith as such and a pre-reflective apprehension (of) consciousness as affecting itself with bad faith. It follows first that the one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies are one and the same person, which means that I must know in my capacity as deceiver the truth which is hidden from me in my capacity as the one deceived. Better yet I must know the truth very exactly *in order* to conceal it more carefully . . . that which affects itself with bad faith must be conscious (of) its bad faith" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 89).

¹¹¹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 43-4. ¹¹² Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 10.

not being reducible to our passions and emotions, and thus consciousness of being tacitly responsible for them),¹¹³ it would be impossible, on this view, to be entirely unaware that one has freely chosen one's racism.¹¹⁴ To do so would be inconsistent, and Beauvoir similarly suggests that expressions of racism are internally inconsistent.¹¹⁵

These definitions of freedom and bad faith imply, insofar as racism is being aligned by Beauvoir with bad faith, that racism is not unwitting, and that one cannot be racist in ignorance. Its very expression is an implicit recognition or avowal, calling attention to itself, identifying itself as such, in what this analysis suggests is inevitable self-contradiction. Racism, considered as a form of bad faith, exposes itself. Sartre and Beauvoir suggest that to deny the freedom of the other is to simultaneously recognize that freedom. Racism bears witness to its own invalidity, and involves an implicit recognition of its own invalidity. Beauvoir's position may be that it is as impossible to be "ignorant" of one's racism, just as (according to the early formulations by herself and Sartre) it was (in a particular sense) impossible to be unaware of one's freedom. But whether or not she would make of this a general rule, the forms of racism that disturb her, and to which she draws our attention, are those that do expose their own contrary, and bear witness against themselves. She does not argue, nor seem to consider that they are the less dangerous, violent, or efficacious as a result of this contradictory nature. Rather, as Beauvoir reads racist rhetoric, its very fragility places it in a violent vice, producing a racism all the more aggressively upheld.

Many have argued that homophobia and racism do typically draw on self-undermining arguments (a characteristic making them no less violent or powerful in their effects). Whether or not such self-contradictory forms are inevitable, they are frequent. Beauvoir makes the suggestion through

¹¹³ See Sartre, *The Emotions: Outline of a Theory*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948) and Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 17.

¹¹⁴ Accordingly, Sartre presents this argument in *Anti-Semite and Jew*. From the same period in his work, *Existentialism is a Humanism* proposes a reference to the will in the context of this discussion. If I hold to, or act in terms of, any values, I just do will them. If I consider that they impose themselves on me, I am in contradiction with my simultaneous act of willing them. This, on Sartre's reading, makes bad faith a specific lie. As Flynn elaborates, "choosing" unfreedom (acting as if the values one favors are imposed upon one) is a "practical inconsistency." See Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 17ff; Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*, ed. Stephen Priest (London: Routledge, 2001), 25–57, 29, 43; and Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism*, 37.

¹¹⁵ Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew* also includes passages discussing anti-Semitism as a choice and as flight from responsibility, but does not use the term "bad faith" or stress that the anti-Semite can hardly be unaware that anti-Semitism is a choice. The work lacks Beauvoir's stress on the tacit drawing attention to bad faith through (for example) contradictory logic; see Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 20, 27. But see Sartre, "Revolutionary Violence," *Notebooks for an Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 555–60.

bringing together the language of existentialism with the race analyses of Myrdal and others, and this contributes to the approach subsequently taken in her analyses of attitudes toward women historically and in 1949.

This intersection of the analysis of the denial of another's freedom as inherently contradictory, and the analysis of bad faith, would then be seen again in *The Second Sex*. Sometimes, in that work, as we have seen, Beauvoir discusses the methodological parallels between her analysis of women and certain analyses of racism that played a role in her conception of the work, as when she referenced Myrdal, and the parallel with American racism, on the question of "whose problem" were racism and sex subordination.¹¹⁶ But these parallels were not always made explicit, as when Beauvoir returns in the following passage from *The Second Sex* to the analysis of the bad faith rhetoric with which women have been othered, a rhetoric implicated in contradictory arguments:

The anti-feminists obtain from the study of history two contradictory arguments: (1) women have never created anything great and (2) the situation of women has never prevented the flowering of great feminine personalities. There is bad faith [*mauvaise foi*] in these two statements; the successes of a privileged few do not counterbalance or excuse the systematic lowering of the collective level; and that these successes are rare and limited proves precisely that circumstances are unfavorable for them. As has been maintained by Christine de Pisan, Poulain de la Barre, Condorcet, John Stuart Mill and Stendhal, in no domain has woman ever really had her chance.¹¹⁷

Though some elements of *The Second Sex* will be concerned with the possible bad faith of women, a good part of the book is also directed at the bad faith of the arguments concerning women to which they are exposed: "So it is that many men will affirm as if in good faith [*avec une quasi bonne foi*] that women *are* the equals of men and that they have nothing to clamour for, while *at the same time* they will say that women could never be the equals of man and that their demands are in vain."¹¹⁸

One effect of this material (though it is not retained consistently in the work), is that it redirects focus from an assessment of the possible "bad faith" of women (in other words, from the focus seen in the introduction and elsewhere in the work, where the window for that judgment is left open: *if* the female subject consents to it, the degradation of freedom into

¹¹⁶ See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US152; UK159; Fr1216; and note 83.

¹¹⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US133; UK164; Fr1222.

¹¹⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, USxxxii; UK26; Fr127–8. (trans. mod).

facticity “represents a moral fault [*faute morale*].”¹¹⁹) For example, it is in the bad faith of the contradictory reasoning relating to sex subordination that Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, states some parallels with the situation of African Americans:

In both cases more or less sincere eulogies are lavished, either on the virtues of ‘the good black’ of dormant, childish, merry soul – the submissive [*résigné*] Negro – and on the woman who is ‘truly a woman’ – that is, frivolous, puerile, irresponsible – the submissive woman. In both cases the dominant class bases its argument on a state of affairs that it has itself created. As George Bernard Shaw puts it, in substance, ‘The American white relegates the black to the ranks of shoeshine boy: and he concludes from this that the black is good for nothing but shining shoes’.¹²⁰

Thus, to see the way in which Beauvoir was able to profit methodologically from the intersection of an analysis of bad faith, and an analysis of racism as contradictory and self-exposing, compare Sartre’s statement, considered in [Chapter 1](#), that, despite the various reasons the identification of someone’s bad faith is not a moral judgment, “we can judge, nevertheless”:

One can judge, first – and perhaps this is not a judgement of value but it is a logical judgement . . . One can judge a man by saying that he deceives himself. Since we have defined the situation of man as one of free choice, without excuse and without help, any man who takes refuge behind the excuse of his passions, or by inventing some deterministic doctrine, is a self-deceiver. One may object: “But why should he not choose to deceive himself?” I reply that it is not for me to judge him morally, but I define his self-deception as an error. Here one cannot avoid pronouncing a judgement of truth. The self-deception is evidently a falsehood, because it is a dissimulation of man’s complete liberty of commitment. Upon this same level, I can say that it is also a self-deception if I choose to declare that certain values are incumbent upon me; I am in contradiction with myself if I will these values and at the same time they impose themselves upon me . . . the attitude of strict consistency is that of good faith.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, USxxxv; UK29; FrI31.

¹²⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, USxxx; UK23–4; FrI24–5 (trans. mod). Where, in *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Sartre proposed as a critical lever on racism that it be interpreted as a choice, Beauvoir emphasized more strongly that racism was a phenomenon of bad faith. Except for a reference in “Existentialism is a Humanism,” Sartre tends to avoid an overt identification of the failure to assume one’s choice as a matter of moral responsibility. But Beauvoir had no hesitations on this point. The fact that she considers both racism and bad faith open to moral evaluation consolidates her capacity to condemn the former. Moreover, the stronger association between racism and bad faith prompts Beauvoir to stress that racism is demonstration, despite itself, of the disavowed freedom of the exploited, a device that would be seen much later in Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

¹²¹ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 42.

Notice here Sartre's repeated stress that what we can evaluate (not morally but "logically") are the contradictions relating to the dissimulation of one's freedom.

It may have been the reservations of Heidegger with respect to the suggestion that inauthenticity was a fault¹²² that prompted cautions from Sartre about any moral overtones to the term "bad faith."¹²³ Sartre's judgement of bad faith is accomplished surreptitiously in *Being and Nothingness*, in the tone of his discussions of the waiter, the woman, the earnest student, the champion of sincerity. In *Anti-Semitism and Jew*, we have seen that when Sartre deems racism a passion, he incorporates this claim into his argument that one chooses one's emotions, and thus into his emphasis on ineluctable freedom. Thus the inevitable recognition of freedom remains the focus, not the inevitable auto-recognition of racism.¹²⁴ Moreover, his ambivalence with respect to the judgement of bad faith undermines the efficacy of stressing that racism is a choice. How much does deeming racism a form of bad faith, with respect to its duplicit, denying self-recognition as a choice, contribute to a discussion of racism if Sartre remains ambivalent about the extent to which bad faith is more generally to be condemned? Meanwhile, Beauvoir's conversion of the intersection of an analysis of racism and an analysis of bad faith took another route, as follows.

We have seen that Beauvoir made ethics her primary concern from the early works *Pyrrhus and Cineas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and that, discussing racism, she appealed to the problematics of bad faith (partly referenced to Sartre), while also importing the analysis of racism's contradictory form from Myrdal's *American Dilemma*.¹²⁵ She returned to the suggestion that neither freedom nor bad faith could be unwitting, concluding that racism could not be unwitting. In her hands, bad faith demonstrates (as

¹²² See Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1978), 189–242.

¹²³ And, ironically, Sartre charged that Heidegger had made this confusion, and erroneously implied that inauthenticity was a moral fault! His work is, claims Sartre, "tainted with an ethical concern shown by its very terminology." See *Being and Nothingness*, 721.

¹²⁴ By contrast, the undated material included as an appendix to *Notebooks for an Ethics* offers a much stronger account of racist rhetoric as contradictory and as elaborate instances of bad faith; see Sartre, "Revolutionary Violence" (Appendix II), *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 561–74.

¹²⁵ Similarly focusing on the context of dialogues concerning race relations in which *The Second Sex* took form, Simons has noted that while Myrdal "seems to have contributed to Beauvoir's social constructionism," he "finds nothing of value in African American culture and community" and directs his attention, instead, to white America "to bring practices into line with the American creed." Simons' critical evaluation of Myrdal as a resource is salutary, as Beauvoir's reading is remarkably uncritical. As Simons suggests, it is (among other reasons) because Beauvoir is also drawing on both Marxist and phenomenological traditions that she "goes beyond Myrdal" (Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex*, 171–2).

it does for Sartre) that racist passion is a choice, but it also demonstrates the contradictory and self-exposing nature of racism, which, as it makes its case, makes a case against itself. The contradictory nature of the disavowal of freedom, stressed by Sartre, converts in Beauvoir's analysis into a more targeted analysis of the contradictions of racism. In Sartre's work, one must be aware one is free. It is in Beauvoir's work that this claim yields the result that one must be aware one is racist. The appeal to logic (or at least to consistency) repeats, but in Beauvoir's hands, racism becomes a matter of self-belying, self-demonstrative inconsistency.

In *The Second Sex*, we have seen that Beauvoir extends this conversion of "bad faith" to a parallel discussion of prejudice toward women, which she took to be a concurrent recognition by the prejudiced agent both of women's freedom and of the *prejudice in question*, as when arguments that women and blacks are apt for menial work are combined with attitudes that restrict their access to more diverse forms of education and training. Though Beauvoir agrees that the denial of one's own freedom is a simultaneous recognition of one's own freedom, this is not her stressed point. Instead, she highlights that denying another's freedom involves the simultaneous recognition of the other's freedom. Ontological freedom – the negating, constant, and ineluctable perspective with respect to the world – is synthesized with what Beauvoir argues is a concurrent ineluctable recognition of the potential and real equality of the other, even when that recognition is also disavowed. Thus bad faith is again converted in Beauvoir's work and becomes a tool for the interrogation of anti-feminism. Her analyses of racism, and much later in her work, of the stigmatized aged¹²⁶ similarly stress the self-incriminating nature of prejudice. Bad faith is a "switch term" in Beauvoir's work, effecting a dialogue between analyses of bad faith as contradictory, racism as contradictory, and racism as a contradictory form of bad faith, a conversion that then reappears in *The Second Sex* with respect to sex subordination.

I suggested in [Chapter 1](#) that Beauvoir's implicit theory conversions are a distinctive and efficacious working method, but prompt further questions. Consider the advantage to Beauvoir of analyzing race and sex subordination as contradictory. This offers an alternative to stating that they are wrong (I will subsequently turn to alternative means Beauvoir deploys for an analysis of sex subordination as wrong), and we have seen in [Chapter 1](#) the ambivalence of both Beauvoir and Sartre with respect to anything that

¹²⁶ See *Old Age (Old Age! The Coming of Age)*, discussed in the following chapters.

appeared as an exterior or universal moral principle. As an alternative, there was some attempt to associate ontology and ethics, differently pursued in the work of the two authors. One example is the suggestion that to will one's own freedom might entail or be the inevitable equivalent of willing the freedom of another. Beauvoir located a supplement to that suggestion, to the extent that she depicted racism and sex subordination as intertwined with inherently contradictory logics. On the other hand, an unasked question lurked in her conversion: what is "wrong" with contradictory logics?¹²⁷ Consider Beauvoir's engaged tenor, as if the pinpointing of contradictory arguments allowed a means out of the dilemma. Perhaps this exposure was being asked to do more work than it could? Moreover, Beauvoir's own discussions of these forms, both in *America Day by Day* and *The Second Sex*, had made clear that while they might be particularly self-exposing forms of bad faith, they were forms that had been efficacious as race and sex subordination for centuries: she was in fact offering a depressing account of the intricate ways in which these forms of subordination proliferated through the means of their own self-exposures and self-contradictions.

Consider also the overlay that occurred in her work regarding one of the forms of authenticity discussed in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and even later in *Sade*, in which authenticity may involve a free assumption of names and vilifications to which one is subjected, or more broadly a free assumption of values one might otherwise only passively reiterate. (This notion of authenticity would echo one of her definitions of ethics as expressed in "Moral Idealism and Political Realism": "one must give up any idea of finding rest: one must assume one's freedom. Only at this price will one be able to truly surpass the given, which is the veritable ethics."¹²⁸) Evidently, the latter concept of ethics alone offers no account of why there could not be an ethical affirmation by the racist of racism, a free and affirmative depreciation of women by men. Sartre, addressing the parallel problem in *Anti-Semite and Jew*, effectively rerouted the problem by noting the

¹²⁷ See also, Beauvoir, "Moral Idealism and Political Realism," trans. Anne Deing Cordero, *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 175–93, for further instances of reference to contradiction in the context of ethics. For example, Beauvoir argues that, "we no longer believed in the kind of ethics whose principles we flaunt; we dare not explicitly formulate nor draw out the final consequences of the ethics that we practice and so believe. The result is much confusion, hypocrisy, bad faith," 189. But she also concludes that "treating man as a means is committing violence against him; it means contradicting the idea of his absolute value that alone allows the action to be fully founded," 190. The former argument locates in our hypocritical adherence to ethics a bad faith, which is one kind of evaluation, but a second arises from the point that to deny the freedom of another is *contradictory*.

¹²⁸ Beauvoir, "Moral Idealism and Political Realism," 190.

contradictory logic of the racist, and he would do so again in his own discussion of race relations in America.¹²⁹ We start to see the accumulation of ideas: Is it vital to affirm our freedom because we are free? Is it vital to affirm the other's freedom because we are free, or because they are free, or because in affirming my freedom it would be inconsistent not to affirm the freedom of this and every other? Is it possible for me to encounter this particular other and deny his or her freedom without implicitly recognizing what is denied? Is the failure to recognize the other as equal "externally" "bad" or "internally" inconsistent? And what if failures to recognize the other's freedom work with the particular efficacy demonstrated by Beauvoir, especially when they are inconsistent?

These different concepts of the problems of contradiction, bad faith, and denial of freedom began to call each other into question. Consider the point that Sade, from the perspective of one definition of conversion offered by Beauvoir, can be understood as affirming and definitively assuming his perversion. Yet from another definition of conversion, also offered by Beauvoir, he consistently denies the freedom of many of his sexual partners. Likely, this denial can, in her view, only occur in "bad faith." Yet Beauvoir also locates a form of authenticity in his relationship to his own objectification. As the concepts of ethics begin to accumulate and resist each other, Sade's very means of ethics as the free assumption of, and surpassing of, the given converts into a failure of ethics by an overlaid definition introduced most famously in the discussions of *eros* in *The Second Sex*, and according to which Sade would not accomplish risk or generosity, or recognize the other as free and equal.¹³⁰

I suggest that this internal dialogue in Beauvoir's work between different variations on a concept can also be considered "auto-resistance," as the author both posits a definition (here of ethics) and establishes alternative and competing variations on it. Those variations then enter into tacit critical dialogue with each other. I turn now to another instance of auto-resistance, which is found in Beauvoir's treatment of repetition.

¹²⁹ See note 123.

¹³⁰ On this see Debra Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997): "unlike Beauvoir, who argues that the category of the erotic provides the ground for an ethic of sensuous generosities, Sade argues that erotic desire precludes the possibility of reciprocity. According to Sade, we are, as isolated desiring subjects, insulated from any claims the other may make on us. As erotic, the embodied subject pursues only its own pleasure," 39.

CHAPTER 3

Conversions of Repetition

My freedom, in order to fulfill itself [*pour s'accomplir*], requires that it open into [*déboucher*] an open future: others open the future to me, it is they who, setting up the world of tomorrow, define my future; but if, instead of letting me participate in this constructive movement, they oblige me to expend [*consumer*] my transcendence in vain, if they keep me below the level which they have conquered and on the basis of which new conquests will be achieved, then they are cutting me off from the future, they are changing me into a thing. Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying, and human existence is indistinguishable from an absurd vegetation . . . Oppression divides the world into two clans: those who develop humanity [*édifient l'humanité*] by thrusting it ahead of itself and those who are condemned to mark time hopelessly [*piétiner sans espoir*] merely to support [*pour entretenir*] the collectivity; their life is a pure repetition of mechanical gestures.

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. mod.

Before taking on a role as one of the personages of French existentialism,¹ Sisyphus had been mentioned by James Phillips Kay and in turn by Engels and then Marx in their evocations of labor: "The dull routine of a ceaseless drudgery, in which the same mechanical process is incessantly repeated, resembles the torment of Sisyphus – the toil, like the rock, recoils perpetually on the wearied operative."²

¹ See Albert Camus, "Myth of Sisyphus," in Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1991), 119–23.

² James Phillips Kay, *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester* (London: James Ridgway, 1832), 8, cited by Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, trans. Florence Wischnewetzky, ed. Victor Kiernan (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1987), 193n; and by Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 548, trans. mod.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*³ and *The Prime of Life*, Beauvoir also condemns the repetitive life of the worker, speaking of the “horrible monotony” of factory movements.⁴ When Marx offers us images of “twenty needle-makers side by side, each performing only one operation of the twenty,”⁵ he argues “a worker who performs the same simple operation for the whole of his life converts [*verwandelt*] his body into the automatic, one-sided implement of that operation.”⁶ To have one’s body converted to a part of a machine leads to a more efficient outcome for the manufacturer; so much the better if workers cultivate neither reason or imagination. As Marx cites Ferguson: “Ignorance is the mother of industry . . . reflection and fancy are subject to err; but a habit of moving the hand, or the foot, is independent of either. Manufacturers, accordingly, prosper most where the mind is least consulted, and where the workshop may . . . be considered as an engine, the parts of which are men.”⁷

Beauvoir criticized historical materialism for its economic reductionism and its inadequate explanation of women’s historical subjugation.⁸ But she never took the opportunity, despite the problematic impact on the other concepts on which she drew, to deny that lifelong repetition of trivialized tasks could reduce an individual in the way suggested by Marx and Engels.

³ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel, 1976), 87.

⁴ Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, trans. Peter Green (New York: Lancer Books, 1962), 65. She describes her visit to a factory: “it was my first encounter with industry and made a violent impression on me. Though it was broad daylight outside, the workshops were gloomy as night, and the air we breathed was laden with metal dust. Numbers of women sat there in front of a moving belt, which was pierced with holes at regular intervals. On the floor beside them was a packing case; from this they took a brass cylinder and inserted it into a hole on the belt, which proceeded to whisk it away. To and fro went the arms, from case to belt and back again, with a quick, ceaseless, staccato rhythm. For how long? I asked. Eight hours at a stretch, in this heat and stench, chained to the horrible monotony of this in-and-out motion, without any respite.”

⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 457. ⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 458.

⁷ Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 174, cited in Marx, *Capital*, 483.

⁸ See “The Point of View of Historical Materialism,” in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir responds to Engels’ *Origin of the Family*, which depicts the subjugation of women as arising from the sedimentation of patriarchal authority in conjunction with the accumulation of wealth that for men “created a stimulus to utilize this strengthened position in order to overthrow the traditional [maternal] order of inheritance in favor of his children.” Engels famously claims that this prompting of “the overthrow of mother right was the world-historic defeat of the female sex.” But while Beauvoir agrees that “the turning point of all history is the passage from the regime of community ownership to that of private property,” she notes that it is by Engels “in no wise indicated how this could have come about.” Moreover, she remonstrates, “it is not clear that the institution of private property must necessarily have involved the enslavement of women.” See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1989), 55–6; (London: Picador, 1988), 86; *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), tome I, 98; and Engels, *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1948), 57.

On the contrary, she expanded the categories of repetition that might fit such a description.

In her 1940s discussions of domestication and women, the theme of repetition encompasses some of her most effective and celebrated material – her denunciation of the tedium of housework – and also some of the material most repudiated by critics – her reservations about maternity. As we listen to the problem posed by repetition in both cases, it becomes clear that the theoretical languages used to formulate the problem are not identical. A series of tensions is introduced into Beauvoir's work, between an account of repetition considered intrinsically problematic for women and others, and Beauvoir's concurrent stress on freedom and transcendence. Beauvoir does not relinquish the view that forms of resistance are always available to women. In identifying women, like all humans, with transcendence, the question arises of how that transcendence is to be located in forms of repetition as they are lived by women, as compared to its expression in the progressive projects that might provide alternatives for, or new meanings to, repetitive lives. It is Beauvoir herself who argues that repetition can never be repetition, but Beauvoir also who is inclined to depict a merely repetitive life or formation, so as to consider its possible social alternatives. Women need economic freedom, we are reminded in "Towards Liberation": gainful employment, civil liberties that are more than theoretical, more than the vote. When Beauvoir claims of economic freedom that nothing else can guarantee concrete freedom for women (*une liberté concrète*),⁹ what are the implications for her account of the problematic of repetition?

REPETITION

Her persuasive condemnation of domestic housework in *The Second Sex* describes it as pointless repetition, partly because of the literal nature of the activity (manual actions such as sweeping and scrubbing – as when one cleans only so as to have to clean again). It could be argued that the absence of social recognition heightens the extent to which an activity or an environment may be lived as repetitive and inhuman, though Beauvoir's analysis will prove more complicated.¹⁰ In this case, the problem seems, initially, to be the intrinsically repetitive nature of the work itself:

⁹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US679; UK689; FrII521.

¹⁰ In an interview with Alice Schwartz, Beauvoir comments that "there is no job which is degrading in itself. The degrading thing is working conditions. What's wrong with cleaning windows? It's just as useful as typing. What is degrading is the conditions under which the windows are cleaned." See Beauvoir with Schwartz, "The Second Sex: Thirty Years On," in *Simone de Beauvoir Today*, ed. Schwartz (London: Chatto and Windus, 1984), 75.

Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day [*jour après jour, il faut laver les plats, épousseter les meubles, reprendre le linge qui seront à nouveau demain salis, poussiéreux, déchirés*]. The housewife wears herself out marking time [*s'use à piétiner sur place*]: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present.¹¹

Assuming we are willing to identify housework as intrinsically repetitive, Beauvoir claims that the work also impoverishes women's relationship to time – it perpetuates the present.

Discussing pregnancy, Beauvoir also associates it, more notoriously, with repetition – the perpetuation of the same and of the present. Once more, Beauvoir assumes domestic work – here associated with childrearing – to be repetitive, and she is here also discussing the historical formation of maternity in a chapter on nomadic and “primitive” forms of human society: “The domestic labors [*les travaux domestiques*] that fell to her lot [*auxquels elle est vouée*] because they were reconcilable with the cares [*les charges*] of maternity imprisoned her in repetition [*la répétition*] and immanence, they were repeated [*ils se reproduisent*] from day to day in identical form, which was perpetuated almost without change from century to century.”¹²

Beauvoir discusses not only the marking of time – in the sense that a child is fed but must be fed again – but also the historically unchanging forms of women's work – from day to day but also from century to century. Women's days don't progress, and neither does their place in history.

Beauvoir also seems to consider reproduction (or, the tasks associated with reproduction) as a basic form of repetition in an opposition whose other pole, in this case, is action. A woman's “misfortune” (*malheur*), she writes, “is to have been biologically destined to repeat Life [*biologiquement vouée à répéter la Vie*].” This is a misfortune, for Beauvoir describes every woman, like every man, as “an existent, inhabited [*habitée*] by transcendence and her project is not repetition but its transcendence toward a different future.”¹³

As Beauvoir widens the field of her condemnations of different types of repetition, she draws on a variety of theoretical languages to do so. For example, she accepts the distinction supposed by Hegel and Marx between one's animal-like and one's more fully human capacities. Repetition of life is equated with basic, necessary life processes including reproduction. If women can't adequately control reproduction, she thinks they are all the

¹¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US451; UK470; FrII235.

¹² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US63; UK94–5; FrII10.

¹³ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US64; UK96; FrII12, trans. mod.

more reduced to this animality.¹⁴ In her chapters on historical materialism and on biology she describes women as “more closely enslaved to the species [*plus étroitement asservie à l'espèce*]” and as victim [*la proie*] of the species¹⁵ and of species life – the level of animal subsistence of the human.¹⁶

She seems not to contest the association between uncreative repetition of life and animality when she distinguishes men and women on these points:

But man assures the repetition of Life while transcending Life through Existence; by this transcendence [*dépassement*] he creates values that deprive pure repetition of all value [*qui dénie à la répétition toute valeur*]. In the animal, the gratuitousness [*gratuité*] and variety of male activities are fruitless [*vaines*] because no project is involved [*aucun projet ne l'habite*]. Except for his service to the species, what he does is immaterial. Whereas in serving the species, the human male also remodels the face of the earth, he creates new instruments, he invents, he shapes [*forge*] the future.¹⁷

Transcendence, imagination, and creation distinguish us from animality and have temporal implications: “The human project [*le projet de l'homme*]

¹⁴ See her comment: “in maternity woman remained closely bound [*rivée*] to her body like an animal” (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US65; UK97; FrI13). Also Beauvoir argues that women do not risk death in maternity, agreeing that historically, men have distinguished themselves from animals in their willingness to risk their lives. See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US64; UK95; FrI11. Eva Lundgren-Gothlin argues, “*The Second Sex* conceives a continuity between human and animal similar to that described by Marx and Hegel. This continuity is broken by a decisive qualitative step: the struggle for recognition and productive activity, respectively. Both Hegel and Marx saw motherhood, and the activities related to it, as closer to the animal than were the activities of men, and since unfortunately Beauvoir does not criticize this androcentric view, she is apt to reproduce it.” See Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex*, trans. Linda Schenck (London: Athlone, 1996), 81.

¹⁵ See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US53, 20; UK84, 52; FrI95, 56. Also see her chapter on “Sexual Initiation”: “instead of integrating the powerful drives [*les forces spécifiques*] into her individual life, the female is the prey of the species [*en proie à l'espèce*],” US372; UK393; FrI131.

¹⁶ The claim (repeated in the sections on biology, on nomadic peoples, and on sexual initiation) that women are more closely enslaved to the species is not the same as the claim she also seems to want to make, echoing formulations from Feuerbach, Marx, and Hegel, that women are more closely enslaved to species life. The latter implies a distinction made between species life and species being, and the suggestion, echoed by Beauvoir but referenced by her to Merleau-Ponty, that the human is not “a natural species but an historical idea [*n'est pas une espèce naturelle: c'est une idée historique*]” or a “historical reality [*réalité historique*]” (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US34, 53; UK66, 84; FrI72, 95). Species being involves humans going beyond mere subsistence and producing value, or identifying themselves with “being-human” or with the universal. Marx argues that humans prove themselves to be “species being” in their transformation of the world in ways that transcend sheer need: “Through it, nature appears as *his* work and his reality.” See Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” in *Karl Marx Early Writings*, trans. Gregor Benton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 279–400, 329; discussed in Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*. On these associations in Beauvoir's work, see Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*, 88–91.

¹⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US64; UK96; FrI11, trans. mod.

is not to repeat oneself in time: it is to take control of the instant and mould the future.”¹⁸

Beauvoir is willing to accept some kind of association between reproduction and repetition. She also suggests that economic reform will promote (though not be sufficient to ensure) women’s equality.¹⁹ Women do not do the right kind of work, nor in the right conditions, to have a better relationship to time. She does seem to agree with historical materialism that workers are in a position to collectively identify, organize, and transform: they have the capacity to be, as workers, historical agents. Women – particularly those who are not paid workers – seem to be considered by Beauvoir “out of time”: not part of a historical or dialectical progress. This is part of the significance of her comments in the introduction to *The Second Sex* about the difference between workers and women.²⁰ One of the questions she asks is how women might, in this sense, convert to agents who are not excluded from what she seems to agree (despite her various reservations about Hegelianism) is a kind of dialectical historical time. Another is how women might engage in different activities, or differently contextualized activities, that would give them a better relationship to time.

REPRODUCTION

But there is also another sense in which Beauvoir draws attention to women’s relationship to temporality. The argument of *The Second Sex* is that women’s historical subjugation first originated with their having been enslaved to the reproductive needs of the species and so (as she sees it) to domination by immanence and repetition. Yet despite what Beauvoir identifies as women’s transformative ability in the twentieth century to control reproduction,²¹ she claims that women remain curiously dominated by expectations that they will pursue a maternity that Beauvoir depicts as uncreative and animal-like.

Just as the literal reproduction of life is considered mere repetition, so is anything relating to purportedly natural or biological functions. In this, Beauvoir echoes Marx’s reference to certain human functions that are “nothing more than . . . animal,” among which he includes “eating,

¹⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* US65; UK97; FrI13, trans. mod.

¹⁹ On the promise of economic reform, see Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* US725; UK734; FrII570.

²⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, USxxiv; UK18; FrI18.

²¹ Presumably she underestimates earlier forms of reproductive control in history and different cultures.

drinking and procreating.”²² Beauvoir seemingly reiterates Marx’s distinction between the non-static transformation of nature through work on the one hand, and, on the other, the mere reproduction of the worker who eats enough to maintain energy lost in the workday, and is procreatively reproduced in proportion to the death rate – both being forms of stasis rather than creation or transformation.²³

In Beauvoir’s hands, this kind of repetition relates both to the quality and to the function of the activity, and to its contextualization. Cleaning and other forms of care, self-maintenance, and maintenance of others, like eating, defecating, and washing, may be necessary activities, but their proper role is to be integrated into a broader creative and productive existence. This is why men are not considered reduced to a life of immanence, even if they are active parents who participate in housework: “If the individual who does such work is also productive, creative, [housework] is as naturally integrated in life as are the organic functions; for this reason housework done by men seems much less dismal; it represents for them merely a negative and contingent [*contingent*] moment from which they quickly escape.”²⁴

So, at times, the point is not to condemn those tasks considered an animal-like repetition, but to stress their having an appropriate place in an integrated existence. When one’s life reduces to static reproduction, Beauvoir claims that transcendence cannot be adequately accomplished. Taking up the definition of the human as *homo faber*, who bursts out of the present through action, making and doing, she considers that women’s reduction to the domestic realm has inhibited their ability to integrate the domains of immanence and transcendence. She does not deny that tremendous satisfaction can be experienced in parenthood, but does not consider pregnancy, in the context of its current conditions, a sphere of creativity. For one thing, happiness (*bonheur*) is not her main concern²⁵; for another, even the innovative conversion of fundamentally immanent concerns is not an ideal aim. Instead there should be integration of immanence

²² Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 327. Beauvoir does point out, however, that historical materialism is at a loss when it comes to women’s role in procreation: “A truly socialist ethics . . . will find most embarrassing the problems posed by the condition of woman. It is impossible simply to equate [*assimiler à*] gestation with a piece of work [*un travail*], or with a *service*, such as military service” (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US58–9; UK89; Fr1102).

²³ Marx, *Capital*, 711; and see his explanation: “The capital given in return for labour power is converted into means of subsistence which have to be consumed to reproduce the muscles, nerves, bones and brains of existing workers, and to bring new workers into existence,” 717.

²⁴ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US453–4; UK472–3; Fr11242.

²⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, USxxxv; UK29; Fr131.

(matters of repetition, stasis, continuity, reproduction) within the proper activities relating to transcendence (making, producing, creating, transforming): “When she is productive, active, she regains her transcendence [*elle reconquiert sa transcendance*].”²⁶ This appears to be why Beauvoir will not define maternity (or paternity) as primarily creative. In the following passage she refers to nomadic peoples of early human history:

the woman who gave birth [*qui engendre*] did not know the pride of creation; she felt herself the passive plaything [*jouet passif*] of obscure forces . . . in any case giving, begetting [*engendrer*] and suckling are not *activities*, they are natural functions; no project is involved [*aucun projet n’y est engagé*]; . . . Man’s case was radically different; he furnished support [*nourrit*] for the group [*la collectivité*], not in the manner of worker bees by a simple vital process [*processus vital*] . . . but by means of acts that transcended his animal nature [*transcendent sa condition animale*]. *Homo faber* has from the beginning of time been an inventor: the stick and the club . . . became forthwith instruments for enlarging his grasp on the world [*agrandit sa prise sur le monde*] . . . he created, he burst out of the present [*déborde le présent*], he opened the future [*ouvre l’avenir*].²⁷

The likely protest is that procreation is neither static nor uncreative. She acknowledges that many might consider maternity productive, but her point is to draw attention to the historically sedimented meanings to which women may contribute, but which also inhabit and inhibit women. A woman, she claims “does not really make the baby, it makes itself within her [*il se fait en elle*]”; “the mother lends herself to this mystery but she does not control it [*la mere se prête à ce mystère, mais elle ne le commande pas*].”²⁸ In fact, Beauvoir thinks that in maternity, a woman is “ensnared by nature [*prise aux rets de la nature*] . . . an incubator [*couveuse*] . . . a human being, a consciousness and a freedom [*conscience et liberté*], who becomes life’s passive instrument.”²⁹ Thus reproduction exposes women to the realm of immanence, not transcendence. Given Beauvoir’s stress on producing something new, what prevents her from identifying pregnancy as the production of the new?

This brings us to the vigorous debate among her commentators about the status of maternity in her work. Some critics have argued that Beauvoir has a relentlessly negative view of motherhood.³⁰ By contrast, Sara Heinämaa

²⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US680; UK689; FrII521.

²⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US63; UK94–5; FrII10–111.

²⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US496, 497; UK513, 514; Fr II308, 308–9.

²⁹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US495; UK512–3; FrII307, trans. mod.

³⁰ See, for example, Catriona Mackenzie, “Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophy and/or the Female Body,” in *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory*, eds. Carole Pateman and Elizabeth Gross (Sydney:

has argued that readers focus erroneously on Beauvoir's apparent antipathy to reproduction. The antipathy, she suggests, is really to repetition. It is true that antipathy to whatever is designated repetition remains a constant throughout Beauvoir's work.³¹

We've seen Beauvoir's argument that reproduction connects women to the mere repetition of life, rather than to creativity. Yet due to greater control over reproductivity women need no longer – as Beauvoir sees it – be entrapped by the reproductive. This point sheds some light on her antipathy since a maternal role indicates domination by convention, by what has always been a woman's role, and so by habit: as another kind of repetition. This is Heinämaa's suggestion: "this idea of repetition is central to the solution Beauvoir offers to the problem of the sexual hierarchy. The core of her extensive discussion on the issue is the claim that women's subjection is a human formation founded on and sustained by nothing else than repeated acts of devaluation and oblivion."³²

Beauvoir may well see maternity as involving both repetition of life and also the repetition of tasks. But the additional aggravation is that it is a matter of repetition (convention, conformity, habit) that makes women persist with these lives of routine, machine-like repetition: "It is easy to see why woman clings to routine [*elle est routinière*]; time has for her no dimension of novelty, it is not a creative upsurge [*un jaillissement créateur*]; because she is devoted [*vouée*] to repetition, she sees in the future only a duplication of the past."³³

HABIT

The suggestion is that Beauvoir condemns not maternity per se, but women's entrapment by and devotion to habit and repetition.³⁴ It is in

Allen and Unwin, 1986); Mary O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981); and Jean Leighton, *Simone de Beauvoir on Women* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975).

³¹ As Le Doeuff comments about *The Second Sex*, "by listening to the text carefully enough to hear in it the author's tastes and dislikes, we realize that the thing that she perhaps hates the most in women's position is the type of repetitive life associated with it" (Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.*, trans. Trista Selous [Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 1991], 92).

³² Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 103.

³³ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US\$99; UK£10; FrII424, trans. mod.

³⁴ Toril Moi has argued that perceptions of Beauvoir's antipathy to maternity are distorted by the errors in Parshley's English translation. See Moi, "While We Wait: The English Translation of *The Second Sex*," in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27, no. 4 (2002): 1–26. For Beauvoir's later reflections on the status of maternity in her work, see "The Second Sex: Thirty Years On": "I do not reject motherhood. I just think that these days motherhood is a very nasty trap for women. I wouldn't advise a woman to have children for that very reason. . . . I'm against the circumstances

a specific sense that maternity does not produce something new. Not because a child is not new, but because it is not new for women to reiterate their association with maternity, does Beauvoir disparage maternity.³⁵ Valuing transformative and innovative roles for women that break with their traditional roles and habits, Beauvoir considers maternity one of women's least novel, most predictable and most repetitive options.

The senses of repetition multiply as we note that a repetitive life is all the more problematic when there has been a habit-guided – and so repetitive – adoption of a repetitive life. Where novelty – and again there are so many senses of novelty – is a value, boredom is a consistent disvalue in Beauvoir's work.³⁶

From this perspective anyone with options should find “domestic felicity” a boring end in itself. A husband is happy enough to enjoy home and family as an anchor but:

Repetition bores him; he seeks novelty, risk, opposition to overcome . . . the children, even more than the husband, want to escape [*dépasser*] beyond family limits [*les limites du foyer*]: life for them lies elsewhere, it is before them; the child desires

under which mothers have to have their children,” 76. Fredrika Scarth has offered a thoroughgoing reevaluation of the status of maternity in Beauvoir's work. She agrees that “Beauvoir's portrayal of the body can . . . be seen as more nuanced than many of her feminist critics would grant,” 164, and she notes that the critique of maternity in *The Second Sex* relates to a number of factors, for example, some of Beauvoir's comments are made in the context of her discussion of nomadic communities, and of whether, in that context, pregnancy could amount to human activity, and a willed risk, rather than a danger. Scarth has no doubt that Beauvoir more generally sees greater potential for a maternity that could be undertaken authentically, rather than in bad faith. Yet she acknowledges Beauvoir's view that “patriarchy also makes it very difficult to undertake maternity authentically (that is, ethically) because it perverts the bond into devotion and makes true generous maternal love almost impossible,” 149. There are some strategic similarities between the respective projects of Scarth and Gail Weiss, given their interest in what the former calls a creative rereading of Beauvoir. Neither Weiss nor Scarth deny that there are ambivalent and plural accounts of ethics in Beauvoir's work, but both find most fruitful an approach that isolates what they take to be the most promising of these accounts. In the case of Weiss, this involves an ethic she brings into proximity with a contemporary ethics of care, and which, conceptually, substitutes original responsiveness to the other in place of the definition of original freedom or choice. Scarth revisits Beauvoir's writing about pregnancy, seeing strong potential to rethink maternity in terms of what Beauvoir herself values (in her discussions of *eros*) as an ethics of risk and generosity. The reading avowedly goes beyond the letter of Beauvoir's text but is, she argues, in affinity with its spirit, 165. See Scarth, *The Other Within: Ethics, Politics and the Body in Simone de Beauvoir* (Lanham, Va.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004); and Weiss, “Challenging Choices: An Ethics of Oppression,” in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir. Critical Essays*, ed. Margaret Simons (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 241–61. One of Weiss's forthcoming projects is *Beauvoir's Ambiguities: Philosophy, Literature, Feminism*.

³⁵ Problematic as they very publicly were, Beauvoir may have believed that the complex alternative family structures that in her personal life she fostered – however painfully for a few of those involved – under the name of “family” were “new.” On this topic, see Hazel Rowley, *Tête-à-tête: Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 310.

³⁶ See, for example, Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, FrI160; FrII46, 87, 272, 274, 277–9, 307, 372, 377, 397, 430, 500, 502–3.

always what is different [*autre*]. Woman tries to set up [*constituer*] a universe of permanence and continuity; husband and children wish to transcend [*veulent dépasser la situation*].³⁷

Beauvoir associates a preferable relationship to novelty with a preferable relationship to time: while the woman's family have, perhaps at her expense, access to both, the woman herself may not. Noting that some individuals come to eventually crave continuity, permanence, and the habitual, she deems this an aberrant rerouting of the desire for difference: this is the fate of the domesticated woman. Moreover, preference given by women to habit or repetitive work is all the more aberrant if one has social and economic alternatives.

Again Beauvoir pursues a contemplation of housework as an impoverished – indeed a paralyzed – relationship to time. This repetition is deemed a death-like stasis: “Washing, ironing, sweeping, ferreting out fluff from under wardrobes [*depister les moutons tapis sous la nuit des armoires*] – all this halting of decay is also the denial of life [*c’est arrêtant la mort refuser aussi la vie*]; for time simultaneously creates and destroys, and only the negative aspect concerns the housekeeper [*la ménagère n’en saisit que l’aspect négateur*].”³⁸

A repetitive existence is that much more destructive if pointless and enforced:

[T]here is no more obnoxious way to punish a man than to force him to perform acts which make no sense to him [*auxquels on refuse leur sens*], as when one empties and fills the same ditch indefinitely, when one makes soldiers who are being punished march up and down, or when one forces a schoolboy to copy lines. Revolts broke out in Italy in September 1946 when the unemployed were set to breaking pebbles which served no purposes whatsoever. . . . This mystification of useless effort is more intolerable than fatigue.³⁹

Insofar as women have had fewer economic options, occupying an environment historically and materially organized to prompt domestic and

³⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US456; UK475; Fr II246, trans. mod.

³⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US451; UK470; Fr II236. See also her description: “*la ménagère maniaque s’acharne avec furie contre la poussière, revendiquant un sort qui la révolte. A travers les déchets que laisse derrière soi toute expansion vivante, elle s’en prend à la vie même*,” contracted in the English translation to “the maniac housekeeper wages her furious war against dirt, blaming life itself for the rubbish all living growth entails” (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US452; UK471; FrII237).

³⁹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 30–1; Fr40. Letters from her lover Jacques Bost during his mobilization depicted in eloquent detail just this kind of subjection: the love of officers for enforcing tasks of pointless repetition apparently designed to reduce the soldier into a compliant and robotic state. See Beauvoir and Bost, *Correspondance croisée 1937–1940*, ed. Sylvie le Bon de Beauvoir (Paris: Gallimard, 2004).

maternal routine, those habits are to some degree enforced – either literally, because of social coercion, or the shared effects of routine. Compare to the inventor or writer whose productive and transcendent activity also involves a high degree of rote work and repetition that Beauvoir does not consider immanent.

Insofar as Beauvoir famously imagines a more authentic relationship to existence that women might have, time also could be associated with novelty. Such a possibility requires conducive social and material circumstances sometimes not available: “let the future be open to her and she will no longer cling desperately [*se cramponnera*] to the past.”⁴⁰ It is not just that women might relinquish grasping onto the past, but that some forms of repetition might not, under different circumstances, be considered repetition. For argument’s sake, imagine that a woman becomes a philosopher, a prospect that Beauvoir obviously did consider to have the status of the new. According to Beauvoir’s argument, all the repetition accompanying academic work (such as citation copying, rote learning, repetitive days in the library, rewriting, teaching the same material, and the repetition of the canon) need not – unlike the tasks of housework – *be* repetition. This is deemed a life of possible stimulation, novelty and differentiation, amounting to an open future, rather than the denial of life.

So, on the one hand, what might appear to involve considerable repetition may not be so represented by Beauvoir (or, she thinks, society). On the other hand, what might seem to transform or interrupt the repetitive is not necessarily valued by Beauvoir. She remains hesitant in her praise for women novelists who depict women’s domestic lives, however brilliantly. Even a domestic or familial feminine literature that embodies resistance to women’s social role may still remain limited in perspective: “by aspiring to clear sightedness [*en se voulant lucides*] women writers are doing the cause of women great service but – usually without realizing it – they are still too concerned with serving this cause to assume the disinterested attitude towards the universe that opens the widest horizons.”⁴¹ Beauvoir considers Emily Bronte, George Eliot, Edith Wharton, and Carson McCullers writers of somewhat limited view, at least in this respect.⁴² If such literary

⁴⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US603; UK614; Fr II428.

⁴¹ She claims that “the splendid *Middlemarch* still is not the equal of *War and Peace*; *Wuthering Heights*, in spite of its grandeur, does not have the sweep of *The Brothers Karamazov*” (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US709–10; UK718–9; FrII553).

⁴² In Chapter 2, I discussed her letters to Nelson Algren in which she deems Carson McCullers too womanly, and compares Edith Wharton (despite admiration for her) unfavorably with Hardy. Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair: Letters to Nelson Algren* (New York: New Press, 1998), III. In

intentions arise within a milieu Beauvoir associates with immanence, the literary gesture may still be considered, at least to some extent, repetitive. Similarly, she does not deny that both artistry and pleasure can be available in domestic contexts, and yet those contexts reconsolidate women's association with traditionally feminine spheres of life. She is unimpressed by the considerable creativity, satisfaction, and ability that can be involved in a woman's mode of homemaking, family, and maternity, when there is nonetheless a continuation of the habits of history and so a fundamental relinquishing of freedom: "Her attitude towards her home is dictated by the same dialectic that defines her situation [*sa condition*] in general: she takes by becoming prey [*elle prend en se faisant proie*], she finds freedom by giving it up [*elle se libère en abdiquant*]: by renouncing the world she aims to conquer a world."⁴³

IMMANENCE

Memorable literature has arisen from women's caustic depiction of domestic and familial *mœurs*. An actress's narcissism can be a subtle art form. Yet even women who innovate in response to the habitual may be:

attempting to justify their existence in the midst of their immanence – that is, to realize transcendence in immanence. It is this ultimate effort – sometimes ridiculous, often pathetic – of the imprisoned woman to transform her prison into a heaven of glory, her servitude into sovereign liberty, that we shall observe in the narcissist, in the woman in love, in the mystic.⁴⁴

Moreover, to act like a woman was, as Beauvoir saw it, a matter of governance by repetition. If accordance with gender norms is a matter of repetition, both sexes should be considered in such terms. Yet it is women who are deemed so impressively repetitive about this form of repetition. Certainly Beauvoir thinks men are governed by habit insofar as they bring their proprietorial impulses to women, for example. But Beauvoir thinks women exaggerate gender norms maximally. This transforms the idea of women as repetitive: doesn't repetition always become something else?

The Second Sex, she seems to be claiming that a silk purse ("genuine" transcendence) can rarely be made of the sow's ear she associated with the category of immanence. For example, there may be a limitation to possible creativity or novelty if the problem of gender remains an overriding concern for women, even in the context of protest, resistance, or fine literature. Apart from the obvious irony that *The Second Sex* might be prone to this limitation, notice that the intention of the writer to critique, resist, create, or innovate is here deemphasized.

⁴³ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US450; UK469; Fr II230.

⁴⁴ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US627–8; UK639; FrII455, trans. mod.

Think of Beauvoir's discussion of women's tears as a theatrical ultra-femininity – today it might be considered a form of femininity verging on the camp:

Tears are at once plaint and consolation, fever and cooling appeasement. Tears are woman's supreme alibi; sudden as a squall, loosed by fits and starts, typhoon, April shower, they make a woman into a plaintive fountain, a stormy sky. Her eyes are blinded, veiled by a mist; no longer a look, they melt in rain; sightless, she returns to the passivity of natural things . . . [the man] considers this performance underhand [*ce procédé déloyal*]; but she considers the struggle underhand [*déloyal*] from the start Whenever tears are insufficient to express her revolt, she will make scenes [*elle jouera*] of . . . incoherent violence.⁴⁵

In 1949, Beauvoir looked at such a woman, and perceived a woman acting feminine and doing so in the mode of compliance – perhaps manipulative compliance but nonetheless compliance – with gender norms, and so the phenomenon of repetition: “The narcissist who identifies herself with her imaginary double [*en s'aliénant dans son double imaginaire*] destroys herself. Her memories become fixed, her behaviour stereotyped; she trots out the same words, she repeats gesticulations [*des mimiques*] that have gradually lost all content, hence the poverty of many diaries and autobiographies written by women.”⁴⁶

IMITATION

Part of her argument is that women do imitate. Whatever its variations, femininity is an “artificial product”⁴⁷ and involves the “playing” of a feminine role (*jouer un rôle de femme*).⁴⁸ Men and women, she argues, “are in some degree playing a part before one another [*sont plus ou moins en représentation l'un devant l'autre*], and in particular, woman.”⁴⁹

Of course there is a difference between the emotional woman and the phenomenon Beauvoir describes as hysteria, a difference between those who “play first at being a man [*joue d'abord à être un homme*]” and becoming “enslaved to the character [*se fait l'esclave de son personnage*].”⁵⁰ But depicting each of these modes of behavior, Beauvoir stresses their imitative nature, their likeness, and continuity. Sometimes passively, sometimes coercively,

⁴⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US608; UK620; FrII434, trans. mod.

⁴⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US639; UK651; FrII474, trans. mod.

⁴⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US408; UK428; FrII174.

⁴⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US411; UK431; FrII178.

⁴⁹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US420; UK439; FrII187–8.

⁵⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US423; UK443; FrII191.

sometimes pathologically, the women depicted in *The Second Sex* reproduce gender norms. Consistently, it is the normative and the imitative aspect rather than the transformative or deviating aspects that Beauvoir stresses; and it is partly for this reason that, as we have seen, she is accordingly unimpressed with the view that performance or repetition of femininity can involve creativity.

So, repetition is depicted as animal, dehumanizing, atemporal, death-like, unrewarding, unstimulating, boring, uncreative, and also related to questions of context, coercion, force, mystification, and recognition, among others, such as the problem of when repetition is repetition.⁵¹ This holds whether Beauvoir describes a woman repeating sexual stereotypes; engaging in repetitive menial work; experiencing monotony in her work or living environment; reducing herself to the repetition of a lifecycle (birth, reproduction, death); or experiencing forms of psychic repetition (living in the past, repeating the same memories). These analyses of phenomena draw on a crowd of interpretative and philosophical models, not all compatible.

For this reason, that there is repetition – for example, consistency in the repetition of gender norms – is a point both reconsolidated and problematized by Beauvoir's work. She is and is not making her case that to reproduce a norm is to reproduce a norm.

EXORBITANCE

Certainly Beauvoir's many strengths did not include a determination to locate difference within repetition. She is inclined to find homogeneity, sameness, and imitation in repetition, disinclined to allow the differentiations embedded in repetition to disturb the overriding diagnosis of repetition. Yet in her work, the phenomenon of repetition is more complex than the language of compliance, passivity, and lack of spontaneity suggests.

In a chapter on female mystics, Beauvoir turns her attention to accounts of the raptures of devout women and female saints: Angela of Foligno, who drank the water in which she washed leper's feet; Marie Alacoque, who cleaned a patient's vomit with her tongue; "the women of a village of Abruzzi [who] still lacerate their tongues licking the pebbles on the way to the cross." The least likely heuristic in this context might be that of sameness

⁵¹ On the other hand, Beauvoir had a great rhetorical flair for the depiction of that repetition; the passage on the manically and hopelessly sweeping housewife is justly famous (*The Second Sex*, US451; UK470; FrII235).

and repetition. Yet the women licking pebbles on the road on the way to the cross are said by Beauvoir to be “only imitating [*imiter*] the Redeemer who saved the flesh by the degradation of his own flesh.”⁵² If they are not imitating Christ, they are imitating their own attitudes in heterosexual love.⁵³ The mystics’ effusions are said to be “patterned [*calquées*] on those of earthly lovers”⁵⁴ and the mystic “has the same behavior [*les mêmes conduites*] to offer to God as when she offers herself to a man.”⁵⁵

If she is to be understood as reiterating the patterns of amorous behavior Beauvoir describes as typically feminine, it is, to say the least, an exorbitant variation. Evidently, it is not the exorbitance that holds Beauvoir’s attention: not the variation within the repetition, so much as the repetition itself. Yet the exorbitance and fracturing of repetition inhabits her depictions, installing a more complex variation on the point made by Beauvoir’s material.

Contextualized in the history of arguments concerning repetition versus difference, one might conclude that Beauvoir reads sameness as sameness and repetition as repetition rather than difference in sameness and repetition.⁵⁶ Moving forward half a century, the woman acting feminine has come to be read differently by feminist philosophers, with Judith Butler rethinking the appeal of repetition as the heuristic in terms of which to understand gender norms. What is the original of the norm that is being repeated? What if there is no original? Is repetition ever just repetition?

⁵² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US677; UK685; FrII515.

⁵³ See Amy Hollywood, “Mysticism is Tempting”: Simone de Beauvoir on Mysticism, Metaphysics, and Sexual Difference,” in *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 120–45. Hollywood discusses limitations in Beauvoir’s account of the female mystics. With respect to Beauvoir’s reading of “women’s religiosity in terms of their identification as man’s other,” 122, and her analogies between erotic and mystical love, Hollywood retains the nuances of the account, noting differences in Beauvoir’s account of various forms of mysticism and her appreciation of Teresa of Avila as an instance of more active agency with respect to her erotic love for the divine. Despite Beauvoir’s generally wary account of female mysticism, Hollywood points out her stress on the fact that that some mystics seek to transcend femininity, some do not; some forms may be akin to hysteria, while many are not; some have lucid ends or social projects, while others seem more aligned with narcissism.

⁵⁴ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US672; UK681; FrII511.

⁵⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US673; UK682; FrII511. See Doris Ruhe for an alternative reading – while noting Beauvoir’s hesitations on the topic, and important variations in her treatment of it, Ruhe stresses that Beauvoir’s reading of the female mystics, and particularly when discussing Catherine of Sienna, Joan of Arc and Teresa of Avila, is also appreciative. (Doris Ruhe, “La tentation du mysticisme,” in Doris Ruhe, *Contextualiser Le Deuxième sexe* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2006), 97–111.

⁵⁶ She tends not to look for transformation, modification, differentiation, or dislocation in repetition, as would, through their various means, contemporary theorists such as Deleuze, Derrida, and Butler. It is repetition as repetition, the repetitive nature of repetition that preoccupies and disturbs her.

What if it must involve dislocating recontextualization and resignification?⁵⁷ Butler proposes that one look more closely at the fracture within the repetition of norms. But as Beauvoir averts such an interpretation, her depictions of repetition are working harder, pulling away from her conclusion and toward an account of their own dehiscence.

In her discussion of the economically independent woman, Beauvoir depicts women wrestling with conflicting standards, and wrestling accordingly with conflicted aims. Some might aim for equality and recognition, and be simultaneously both valued and devalued for their seeming equality. If they do not pursue certain aims (either those associated with traditional femininity, or those associated with contemporary economic independence), they may be disparaged, but they may be differently disparaged if they do. Beauvoir discusses the difficulties for women who pursue equality, arguing that it is no mystery that many women do not. This account is a focus of the final two chapters of *The Second Sex*, where Beauvoir continues to offer accounts of repetition, whose role is to indicate that women are thwarted by context, and prompted by those same contexts to be self-thwarting. Their context divides them against themselves, and provokes their pursuit of opposed and mutually thwarting aims.

In these final two chapters, as elsewhere in the work, Beauvoir opens the door to a consideration of the auto-resistance of women's repetition. Given that they are inhabited by conflictual aims, the project of repetition is evidently in conflict with the project of innovation. Beauvoir does argue that such conflict produces women more repetitive than one might have hoped. In this sense, she "subtracts" the repetition from the innovation (in another words, repetition indicates that much less innovation). But this is not the only way to interpret her own examples. It would have been equally plausible for her to interpret the repetition as modified by the self-conflict. Thus, one notes again a series of examples in which her material seems to be speaking counter to (or in ways more diverse than) the conclusions she draws, as when she, implausibly, tells us that "the social structure has not been profoundly modified by the evolution in woman's

⁵⁷ For this reason, Butler argues that the normative rules of gender provide the context in which the gendered subject is generated, yet these rules are not fully determining. Because they must be repeated, there is room and necessity for unpredictable and surprising repetitions. "The subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; "agency," then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" (Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 185.

condition; this world, always belonging to men, still retains the form they have given it.”⁵⁸ Subtracting the innovation from the repetition, we are left with the conclusion that traditional male forms remain much the same. Yet Beauvoir also thinks there has been considerable change. Certainly she could allow that traditional male forms are modified by the conflict she describes while retaining her unique attention to conflict and self-division.

This suggestion is made with, not against, the grain of Beauvoir’s work. She depicts women’s contradictory existence within a traditionally male world. These may not be “equal” lives, but neither are they a repetition of an unchanged context. We can encourage Beauvoir’s text to a conclusion slightly oblique to her rhetorical stress. Similarly, Beauvoir mentions women working in a Renault car factory who state “that they would prefer to stay in the home rather than work in the factory” as an occasion for explanation: if the women are underpaid and still expected to do housework there is no great mystery that they “do not escape the traditional feminine world.”⁵⁹ Again, it is not against Beauvoir’s conclusion, but a different sifting of her reflections, to note that the woman working in the Renault factory is evidently not repeating her association with the traditional feminine world in the same ways as the woman for whom this is not an option, as the home worker who is also working in the Renault factory, or as the woman who does not pursue paid work but for whom the alternative is a realistic option.

A similar plurality of interpretative possibilities persist with respect to the examples provided in the closing pages of *The Second Sex*. True, a stress on dehiscence in repetition will not suit her conclusions. We’re told that:

only those women who have a political faith, who take militant action in unions, who have confidence in their future, can give ethical meaning [*un sens éthique*] to thankless daily labor. But lacking leisure, inheriting a traditional submissiveness, women are unsurprisingly only just beginning to develop a political and social sense. And not getting in exchange for their work the moral and social benefits they might rightfully count on, they naturally submit to its constraints without enthusiasm.⁶⁰

Because Beauvoir is stressing here the importance of politics and action, the argument does not remind us that these workers nonetheless live in an

⁵⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US680; UK689; FrII522, trans. mod.

⁵⁹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US680; UK690; FrII522.

⁶⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US680–1; UK690; FrII522, trans. mod. With respect to the previous discussions of the multiple meanings of ethics in Beauvoir’s work, note this additional appeal to the “ethical meaning” that *can* be given to “thankless daily labour” by “those women who have a political faith, who take militant action in the unions, who have confidence in their future.”

inevitably transformed and converted world. Yet these women, according to this same narrative are “beginning to develop a political and social sense.”⁶¹ Whether Beauvoir understands them as submissive, or as partially breaking with submissiveness, new inflections are given to “traditional” submission in both scenarios. Beauvoir’s account enfolds the non-persistence of the same, even when her own conclusion is that, in the absence of overarching change (she mentions both socialist change, economic independence, *and* reciprocal recognition), things will be much the same, or that young women working as apprentices, as secretaries, in shops, “will not care to renounce the advantages of masculine support.”⁶² Some may not care to, but the meaning of “not caring to” will be differently inflected. Though Beauvoir does not give strong rhetorical weight to the differentiations within the continuities of tradition, her material allows an interpretative “give,” which indicates a richer web of possible interpretations embedded in her conclusions and certainly not inconsistent with her analyses.

This also suggests another means of approaching the objections that have been made to Beauvoir’s discussions of maternity and species life or even those disconcerting half-deprecations of some women’s projects.⁶³ To focus on Beauvoir’s preoccupation with repetition need not distract us from her simultaneous undermining of its consistency. Devaluing what she associates with repetition, she also defines so many kinds of activity and relationship as repetitive that the term is destabilized.

For example, Beauvoir directs attention to the quality of women’s temporality. Her work stresses the many and varied kinds of theoretical languages needed to make this point. Note the difference between species-life, reproduction, and gender role-playing. To identify and link these as repetition is an argument both for and against the idea that women are inveterate repeaters.

Even Beauvoir’s descriptions of women’s pregnancies, literature, decoration, and self-laceration suggest not only habitual lives, but also, in the plethora of habit and the mutual conflict of these habits, lives in which habits are broken. Beauvoir might argue that women are repetitive because they follow habit, or because reproduction is repetitive, or because their gender behavior occasionally verges on elaborate theater. But

⁶¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US680–1; UK690; FrII522.

⁶² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US681; UK690; FrII522.

⁶³ To use a formulation concerning Sartre suggested by Derrida, this material likely becomes most persuasive when it most disagrees with itself (Derrida, “‘Dead Man Running’: Salut, Salut,” *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971–2001*, ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002], 257–94, 275).

the one account of repetition becomes an account of the breaking of the habits of the other kind of repetition. These accounts of repetition start to pull against themselves: as accounts of repetition layer up, persuading and consolidating, they weaken each other. This structure is almost characteristic of Beauvoir: amid the work of this writer preoccupied with the repetitive nature of repetition, her work concurrently makes a unique case for the contrary thesis,⁶⁴ that the more there is repetition, the less there is repetition.

To read Beauvoir's own work is to find that a matching question is prompted: whether to read, as Beauvoir herself does, repetition as repetition. Even within her own preoccupation with the problematic, there is discordance within and resistance to the heuristic of repetition. Given that we can seek out resistance in her own work to the heuristic she favored, there may be just as much promise in a reading of her work that emphasizes such interruptions.

Making appeal to both Marxist and existentialist languages, the conclusion of *The Second Sex* offers an account of the economic freedom that women need for their equality to be more than theoretical, or legal. In particular, voting and legal rights are insufficient if women do not work, and in some respects it is work that is most likely to interrupt women's "vain pursuit of being [*l'impossible poursuite de l'être*] through narcissism, love, or religion"⁶⁵ – pursuits that, as we have seen, are particularly associated with repetition. But Beauvoir confronted the problem that many forms of working life are also associated with repetition. Evidently, the right to vote and access to work do not alone make for liberty for the working class. This preoccupation helped her to maintain the emphasis that women need both paid work and a revolution in the overall social organization of work. Beauvoir states that when a woman is "productive, active, she regains [*reconquiert*] her transcendence,"⁶⁶ but she also recognizes that paid work

⁶⁴ One that is strikingly unlike the treatment of dislocating repetition in Butler's work; see note 56. It is, according to Butler's well-known argument, because gender norms must be repeated that the possibility of their planned or unplanned gender subversion is inevitable and constant. This leads Butler into reflections on the nature of subversive repetition. See Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

⁶⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US679; UK689; FrII521, trans. mod.

⁶⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US679; UK689; FrII521. The argument can be compared with that offered in *La Vieillesse*. There, economic factors are stressed more strongly still than in *The Second Sex*. An economic revolution, one encompassing a revolution in concepts of humanity and worth, would also be needed to combat the dehumanization of the aged. The aged are likely to be seen as less than human if we associate worth with wealth and economic productivity. Beauvoir therefore calls for a transformation of such associations, in addition to the need to change attitudes towards "aging." A change in attitudes towards "aging" would not be of broad enough scope. For example, if, post the time of their profitability for others, aged workers are treated as sub-human, change could

alone may not be productive and active. An interleaved formation was required, through which women could be productive and active in relation to both work and femininity. Once she acknowledges that many of the forms of work to which women can gain access risk being repetitive, Beauvoir beckons to the analysis that will explain under what conditions work can be, in the full sense she intends, productive and active. Thus, on the one hand she speaks positively of the proud independence of a woman cleaning a hotel lobby, but on the other she emphasizes that the right to vote and a job does not guarantee for a woman *une parfaite libération*: “working, today, is not liberty,” and only in a socialist context could work and liberty begin to imply each other.⁶⁷ Beauvoir also notes that if some women prefer traditional lives – the repetition of domestic norms, feminine stereotypes, life in the home – it is not just because they follow habit, but also because the work to which they have access is underpaid, would redouble their overall workload, and duplicate their traditional role. Even for those women with access to highly paid work and an excellent degree of autonomy, Beauvoir continues to provide a variety of reasons why their claims to equality are inhibited.

According to Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, because Beauvoir is synthesizing existentialist phenomenology, Hegelianism, and Marxism, “the conflicts between the different ontologies on which these philosophies are based explain some of the contradictions contained in *The Second Sex*.”⁶⁸ Beauvoir does, on this view, agree that women were originally subordinated to the species, physically weaker, bound to the needs of reproduction, and not in a position to transcend their animality or to engage in productive activity.⁶⁹ Moreover, despite Beauvoir’s criticisms of Engels, *Sex and Existence* suggests that she did “revert” to a determinist Marxism, at least insofar as she accepted the connection between women’s subordination and their exclusion from production. “She follows Marx in defining woman’s reproductive activities as unproductive. She follows Hegel and Kojève in seeing

arise through an overall reconfiguration of conceptions of human worth. To have been considered raw material for the profit of others is always to have been treated as sub-human. While attitudes towards old age bring this life-long phenomenon sharply into focus, it is the overall attitude towards human potential and value – not just attitudes towards “aging” – which requires transformation. While this answer is, of course, not simple, Beauvoir declares: “the answer is simple; one would always have to have been treated as human [*“la réponse est simple: il faudrait qu’il ait toujours été traité en homme”*] (*Old Age*, 603, trans. mod.).

⁶⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US679; UK689; FrII522.

⁶⁸ Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*, 247.

⁶⁹ Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*, 248.

it as more human to risk one's own life than to bring a new life into the world, the latter being something we share with animals."⁷⁰

But this seems not to be a reversion so much as a project in which a transformative dialogue is at work, once seen through the lens of the different – and mutually questioning – ways of conceiving repetition that arise within a work inhabited by different theoretical languages. Heinämaa assesses Beauvoir's relationship to these philosophical debts differently. Beauvoir's transcendence concerns not only making and doing, but also the creation of new values.⁷¹ Beauvoir could be seen as transforming the question of what men and women risk when they risk their lives, and when they take the risk of reproduction. In both cases, the question is whether the risk involves the creation of new values (for example, for humans to exchange the drive to survive in favor of the willingness to risk their lives for other aims might be considered a new *value*). Reproduction may offer less of a context for the creation of new values because it is collectively perceived as the reiteration of women's traditional habits.

Heinämaa's reading provides an alternative to those who see Beauvoir as merely reiterating the view of maternity as unproductive. But one can identify in Beauvoir both an adherence to a concept of unproductive repetition *and* a stress on the production of new values. If so, notice the questions set into play by the relationship between these stresses. When she argues that women need economic freedom, is that a new value for women, or the context in which women could be more value-producing? Under what conditions are new values produced? Certainly, Beauvoir considers it is by living less repetitive lives, but what makes those lives less repetitive? It is their becoming the context for the production of new values. One can make this sound less circular by returning to the point Beauvoir emphasized: women need both individually located resistances and transformed social contexts that will make those resistances more meaningful, recognizable, and possible. Yet Beauvoir's argument arose from its own conflictual pulls. To argue that one tendency in her work is the stress on repetition is not to minimize the complexity of her work; or her overall focus on the values of resistance, transcendence, and freedom; or the countering textual elements demonstrating that repetition can never be just repetition. To the contrary, it allows us to consider the complex way in which these elements interact in her work.

⁷⁰ Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*, 251.

⁷¹ Heinämaa, *Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, 108–9, 121.

ENERVATION

One of the most memorable elements of Marx's discussion of alienation concerns his account of its physical and affective manifestations. When labor is "external" to workers and their "essential being," and when they are therefore not "confirmed" by their work, Marx describes the results physically. He often mentions their ruined humanity: they are reduced from being a man to being "an abstract activity and a stomach,"⁷² ruined minds and bodies, depressed "both intellectually and physically to the level of a machine,"⁷³ and exposed to early death.⁷⁴ But he also describes their depleted affective and energetic life; such a worker "feels miserable and is not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy."⁷⁵ This is the result of the so-called loss of self resulting from the worker's perception that his or her labor belongs to another.

What then of the affective and physical implications for girls and women of sex subordination? Beauvoir describes women who work in homes as self-thwarting, and included dulled enthusiasm (*paresse*) and resignation among the affective states relating to unpaid work pursued in the home and family context.⁷⁶ She similarly describes the lack of enthusiasm of female factory workers and other women in underpaid and unrewarding jobs, particularly those complemented with continuing expectations that they are responsible for the family and housework.⁷⁷ Young girls seek "activity and independence"; they have the "spontaneous urge towards life" and "enjoyment of playing, laughing, adventure."⁷⁸ Beauvoir considers that this spontaneous urge, *élan*, enthusiasm, and taste for adventure becomes inhibited by their confined and limited choices and in many cases by the kind of work they do: monotonous and unproductive.

Taking some points of reference from the early Marx, Beauvoir may consider women to exist in a very particular form of alienation. Unlike some feminist critiques of Marx, her criticism is not that he devotes insufficient attention to the importance of reproduction as opposed to production.⁷⁹

⁷² Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," 285.

⁷³ Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," 285.

⁷⁴ Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," 286.

⁷⁵ Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," 326.

⁷⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US473; UK491; FrII275.

⁷⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US680–1; UK690; FrII522.

⁷⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US294; UK321; FrI.

⁷⁹ Susan Himmelweit, "Reproduction and the materialist conception of history: A feminist critique," *The Cambridge Companion to Marx*, ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 196–221, 196.

Nor does she attempt to reintegrate into his analysis phenomena that seem essential to the capitalist economy, such as housework, or apply categories such as use-value, exchange value, or labor power to women's situation. She does not ask whether housework is productive, and she does not determine its status as a form of production (where some have suggested it might be akin to a preindustrial form embedded within capitalism and important to the latter).⁸⁰ She does not argue that women are alienated in the sense that their clean houses or nurtured children are a form of alienated labor. Thus it is a curiosity that she likens women's symptoms and condition to a state analogous to Marx's alienated worker, both of these theorists suggesting the parallel with animality.⁸¹

What conclusion should be drawn? Criticisms that Marx omitted a place in the theory of capital for women's work in the home (and for sex and reproduction as possible modalities of oppression) are common, but Beauvoir also includes an additional route, suggesting a parallel between women and workers in terms of a less predictable question: their physical and affective condition. Where Marx discussed the listless apathy produced by factory work and alienation from means and product of production, Beauvoir asked why women who were not in the workforce, and were an invisible element in the generation of capital, required a description not unlike that of the alienated worker. The humanism of Marx and Beauvoir is seen in the concern that women and workers are less than human, though the reasons and the relationship to production and power are differently identified in the two cases.

Marx offers a specific explanation for the depleted energy and enthusiasm, the dull affect of the worker lacking control over the product and process of production: workers are working against themselves. Having described estrangement of the object [*Sache*], Marx describes estrangement of the process of production as a self-estrangement, as follows:

The relationship of the worker to his own activity as something which is alien and does not belong to him, activity as passivity [*Leiden*], power as impotence, procreation as emasculation, the worker's own physical and mental energy, his

⁸⁰ Himmelweit notes that this integration was among the projects of Marxist feminism, particular in the 1970s ("Reproduction and the materialist conception of history," 201). For a good overview of the extensive literature on feminist approaches to Marx, see Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1983).

⁸¹ See also Sartre's essays on Marxism written between 1952 and 1954, and translated as Sartre, *The Communists and Peace with an answer to Claude Lefort*, trans. Irene Clephane (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1969), in which he too says of the worker on the assembly line, "it deadens the desires of those who do not lose their wits altogether: they repeat the same gesture, all day long dream or count in their minds or ruminate, brooding over the same phrase at each new beginning," 221.

personal life – for what is life but activity? – as an activity directed against himself, which is independent of him and does not belong to him.⁸²

Women, via a dehumanization in their case often relating to invisible work supporting the (already alienated) worker's contribution to capital, produce children for, effectively, a patriarchal lineage. They may see their humanity reduced to reproductive capacity in this respect, and are often involved in constant hard labor with no exchange value. Thus, they may be depleted in enthusiasm and dulled in affect. How might that condition be explained, given that Beauvoir seems not to propose that women are literally alienated in their production of (for example) femininity, household and family sustenance, and/or children? Nonetheless, we have noted her view that women are divided against themselves, whether they work in the home or workforce, whether or not they are engaged in a concerted struggle for equality. They are also unlikely to feel that their work and its results belong to them satisfyingly, as little recognition is forthcoming. Beauvoir suggests that their offspring is one of the few things some mothers might feel they have “produced,” in some respects. A problematic relationship to reproduction results, and in any case, their children are evidently not an object of control or possession; thus dissatisfaction must arise.⁸³

Certainly, part of Beauvoir's account of women relates to their frequently redoubled workload, and work that she deems unrewarding and unproductive. Yet we have noted her willingness to acknowledge that there is repetition in many tasks, including those that register as productive and creative. Context renders a task repetitive. Marx would have identified that “context” with the condition and mode of production, and the relation to its process and product, but Beauvoir broadens the matter beyond economic context, although she hardly discounts the latter. It seems, then, that the appeals to Marx at both the outset and the conclusion of the section “Towards Liberation” should not be taken as evidence of Beauvoir's debt to Marx (not that this debt should be under-emphasized), nor her adherence to the importance of economic conditions (though again

⁸² Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 327.

⁸³ Beauvoir stresses that a woman does not “really make her baby, it makes itself [*se fait*] within her,” and cites Colette Audry's heroine of *On joue perdant* as understanding this when she comments, “There he was, born of me; thus he was like a piece of work that I could have produced in my life [*il ressemblait à l'oeuvre que j'aurais pu faire dans ma vie*] . . . but after all he was nothing of the kind [*mais enfin il ne l'était pas*],” trans mod. Though it is an illusion, Beauvoir suggests that women who are restricted in their opportunities for creation and production are that much more likely to see their children as produced by and belonging to them (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US496; UK513–4; FrII308).

she stresses their importance). Rather, the appeals should be seen as some kind of conversion of Marx, an adherence to a notion of alienation that at the same time widens its capacities to include parallel analyses beyond economic alienation.

Beauvoir's resistance to her own ideas, their complexity and internal dialogue, is best appreciated in the context of her 1970 work, *La Vieillesse* (*Old Age/The Coming of Age*), in which she repeats the problematic of alterity with many similarities to the approach taken in *The Second Sex*. Many of Beauvoir's concepts – ambiguity, authenticity, reciprocity, alterity – would find themselves reconfigured in this material. It is arguable that the context of aging allowed Beauvoir, particularly once she had identified its status as a mode (as she argued) of alterity, to rethink many of her presuppositions concerning the ethical ideal, self-other relations, the basis for reciprocity, and the promises of conversion. This is not to suggest that Beauvoir superseded her earlier formulations in *The Second Sex*. For one thing, the alterity of aging was evidently not equivalent to the alterity of sex and gender. Thus, it was to be expected that formulations of alterity, authenticity, and ethics would be different in these theoretical contexts, and allow for an implicit dialogue (not one thematized by Beauvoir), this time between the formulations of *The Second Sex* and those of *La Vieillesse*.

Most elements of Beauvoir's work offer the nonexclusive possibilities of new interpretations in the context of writers and philosophers who found elements of their work converted in her hands, and further possibilities for interpretation in the light of Beauvoir's auto-conversion of her own work. The play of conceptual resistance between her major works on gender and aging make the latter interpretation fruitful. In fact, it is striking that just as she was highly disinclined to demarcate the points of disagreement between herself and theorists she used and valued, she similarly seems to have been disinclined to demarcate points of disagreement or challenge to her own ideas within her work. Thus, while there are certainly some tacit references in *La Vieillesse* to the arguments of *The Second Sex*, given the extensive international debate incited by the latter, it was remarkable that Beauvoir, proposing a new reading of alterity, did not identify points of possible debate with her earlier work. A certain amount of Beauvoir's material on women repeats, including a reference to the idea, presented in *The Second Sex* in the "From Maturity to Old Age" section that for women who have "staked" (*misé*) more, or all on their looks and physicality, aging is particularly difficult. Beauvoir does not clarify for the reader whether she takes herself to be continuing, consolidating, or undermining her earlier findings. Whether she appears to be reprising, agreeing, or disagreeing with

her earlier work, Beauvoir is unlikely to make overt statements about her own conversions. Some later material departs promisingly from the 1949 work. When Beauvoir suggests in *La Vieillesse* that men may lose, in aging, and particularly in retirement, what has conventionally distinguished them from women, and as a result may experience aging with greater difficulty than do women, it seems that sex and gender must be reconceptualized in the context of the differentials of aging. Yet Beauvoir does not take up directly the new conclusions one might bring to *The Second Sex*, nor address the relationship between the two works' conclusions.⁸⁴

OLD AGE

If Beauvoir converted, as much as she appealed to, the resources of Marx and historical materialism, the greater emphasis she gave to the intersection of economics and embodied existence in her work two decades after *The Second Sex* adds to this project. Beauvoir had written in *Force of Circumstance* in 1963 that she considered her account of women as the other in *The Second Sex* over-influenced by her conception of an a priori struggle of consciousnesses, and that, if she were to revise the work, she would have given greater emphasis to a materialist perspective and also to the laws of supply and demand.⁸⁵ In 1970, Beauvoir would in *La Vieillesse* consider another group positioned as "the other," the aged. Again, inequality was associated with solutions relating both to recognition and to economics, for one of the factors rendering the aged the other was their economic inequality, their exclusion from a workforce that had offered at least the promise of value and greater financial autonomy. Returning to the problem of repetition, and not discounting the variables introduced by wealth, health, and many other factors, Beauvoir nonetheless stressed the tendency to a repetitive existence of many aged individuals. These are complex readings, offering multiple senses of repetition (memory, spatiality, habit, novelty

⁸⁴ Beauvoir's large-scale late work is often omitted from theoretical assessments of her work, and this is a missed opportunity. However, exceptions include Sarah Clark Miller, "The Lived Experience of Doubling: Simone de Beauvoir's Phenomenology of Old Age," *The Existential Phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Wendy O'Brien and Lester Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 127–47; Ursula Tidd, "For The Time Being: Simone de Beauvoir's Representation of Temporality," in *The Existential Phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. O'Brien and Embree, 107–26; Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir* (London: Routledge, 2004); Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir: Gender and Testimony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Stella Sandford, *How to Read Beauvoir* (London: Granta, 2006), and Oliver Davis, *Age Rage and Going Gently: Stories of the Senescent Subject in Twentieth-Century French Writing* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006).

⁸⁵ Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 192.

versus monotony) and multiple levels of explanation for the experience of repetition.

Retained in this material is the view that repetition is generally a negative variable, the position that recurs throughout Beauvoir's work. Her autobiographical material also manifested it, with respect to aging. Arguably, a point of auto-resistance within her work is the view that at a certain age in her own life, she is doomed to a repetition of the same. Certain possibilities, and particularly certain novelties, are no longer possible. With no irony, Beauvoir declares at fifty-five of her experience, as she understands it, of old age:

My heart too has been infected by it. I have lost my old power to separate the shadows from the light, to pay the price of the tornadoes and still make sure I had the radiance of clear skies between. My powers of revolt are dimmed now . . . but my joys have paled as well. . . . Yes, the moment has come to say: Never again! It is not I who am saying goodbye to all those things I once enjoyed, it is they who are leaving me; the mountain paths disdain my feet. Never again shall I collapse, drunk with fatigue into the smell of the hay. Never again shall I slide down through the solitary morning snows. Never again a man.⁸⁶

This becomes a point of auto-contestation autobiographically, in that Beauvoir would shift several times her identification of what age (if any) really made such "nevers" inevitable. In her last autobiographical work, Beauvoir reconsiders not the specific age in question, or the particular experiences that were or were not foreclosed, but her very interpretation of repetition: in *All Said and Done*, she rethought the inevitabilities of aging at least with respect to their application to herself: "My life does not seem at all stagnant to me. Its repetitive side is no more than the background against which the new is endlessly inscribed [*ma vie ne m'apparaît pas du tout comme stagnante. La répétition n'est qu'un fond où s'inscrivent perpétuellement des nouveautés*]." ⁸⁷

The auto-resistance in her work thus concerns not only the time and form of any inevitable repetition, but its very definition. There need not be a repetitive life, she eventually declares, because repetition can also provide the ground or background for the new to inscribe itself. Presumably, there can be no new without repetition, and, arguably, no repetition without the new. Her interpretation of the fleeting infinitesimal pleasures and tactile *eros*

⁸⁶ Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 657.

⁸⁷ Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (New York: Warner, 1974), 43, trans. mod; Beauvoir, *Tout compte fait* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 45. O'Brian translates "s'inscrivent perpétuellement" as, "new things perpetually appear."

that were not impossible for her mother dying in great pain with cancer in a hospital bed⁸⁸ expresses this revision.⁸⁹ However, even when Beauvoir revisits her visions of repetition (installing a complex auto-questioning within the conclusions of *Old Age*), one constant does persist: a “pure” repetition would be negative. The “saving” point is the modification that there never can be mere, nor pure, repetition. There will always be some kind of differentiation; novelty and the new can inscribe themselves even on a highly repetitive “background.”

THE VARIABILITY OF REPETITION

Taking great care to stress that for many aging subjects there is neither a decrease in health, *eros*, or intellect (there may well, she pointedly stresses, be cases of increase), Beauvoir nonetheless attempts to identify a phenomenon she does think can be distinguished amid all these variations: the possibility that a subject devalued as aged may live a life that is temporally more frozen and seems more bound to repetition.⁹⁰

There are practical, even physical or biological reasons for this possibility – matters of quality of memory, of physical capacity – and while not discounting these, Beauvoir nonetheless directs her attention to the

⁸⁸ For her discussion of *A Very Easy Death*, see Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Corporeality* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁸⁹ See Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*, trans. O'Brian (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1969), discussed in Penelope Deutscher, “Bodies, Lost and Found: Simone de Beauvoir from *The Second Sex* to *Old Age*,” *Radical Philosophy* 96 (July/August, 1999): 6–16.

⁹⁰ I have elsewhere argued that Beauvoir relinquishes in this work a moral evaluation of aging subjects with respect to whether they “freely assume” their situation of age. She certainly emphasizes the differentials in how it may be lived, a good number relating to context, recognition, respect, wealth, and cultural and historical context. Allowing in elaborate detail for the play of these variables, she is consistent in not evaluating either the “authenticity” or the “bad faith” of the aged. To locate the work of self-contestation on this point one might read together “The Age of Discretion” (in which a narrator discusses what she takes to be the bad faith of her aging partner, but finds herself obliged to modify her judgmentalism), *A Very Easy Death*, and *Adieux*. The latter two works both depict forms of behavior that might have been seen as bad faith, while averting that language and the judgment. In this respect, they are strikingly forbearing when compared to the tenor of the introduction and conclusion to *The Second Sex*, which do bifurcate between those who do or don't take easy slopes, or are at fault. Such a tone is absent from Beauvoir's discussions of her mother and Sartre as aging subjects. If anything she almost bears witness to the inevitable inauthenticity and bad faith of living immanent death and extreme disease. See Beauvoir, “The Age of Discretion,” trans. O'Brian, in *The Woman Destroyed* (London: HarperCollins, 1984), Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*; and Beauvoir, *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, trans. O'Brian (New York: Pantheon, 1984). Weiss's *Body Images* also takes up the question of ethical appraisal, its limited value, and an alternative vision of ethics, in the context of Beauvoir's *A Very Easy Death*.

intersection of recognition and economic status.⁹¹ She describes the phenomenon particularly in the context of many writers on the topic, including Leiris, Flaubert, and Chateaubriand: "It may happen, either for reasons of health or because of outside difficulties, that the old person is utterly and finally disheartened: either he sees nothing more to do, or he gives up his undertakings, supposing he has no time to carry them through to the end."⁹²

In this vein, she claims of this possible experience of old age that it can "reduce strength; it deadens emotions [*elle éteint les passions*]. . . . Age often sinks into physical weariness [*abattemennt physique*], general fatigue and indifference, turning one from concern with others [*l'autrui*]."⁹³ There may be a loss of the "eager spring [*élan*] towards the future,"⁹⁴ more recollection than creation, the adoption of a "passive attitude of renunciation,"⁹⁵ and an increasing desire to live in the past. Some may turn over and over a few themes of emotional value, taking pleasure from this kind of perpetual repetition,⁹⁶ losing the quality of alacrity when it comes to new creation.⁹⁷ In such cases, there is an enhanced risk of living in the past, returning to past memories and one's own past ideas and experiences: "the danger of repetition"⁹⁸: "For man existing means self-transcendence [*se transcender*]. A consequence of biological decay is the impossibility of surpassing oneself [*l'impossibilité de se dépasser*] and of becoming passionately interested with anything [*de se passionner*]; it kills all projects."⁹⁹

Certain experiences of old age can be lived with this lack of *élan*, lack of passionate interest, the absence of the project, although Beauvoir stresses that this state is not the inevitable result of biological decay. An individual might experience extreme disease and disability, but retain passionate interest, and such variations relate not just to the differentials of biological factors but also to differentials of context, recognition, class, occupation,

⁹¹ Although I discuss Beauvoir's autobiographical rejection of aging in *La Force des choses*, she was, particularly in her discussions of aging, attuned to exceptions. Having likened the repetition and the more housebound life of some aged individuals who have lost some degree of mobility, with the repetitive and housebound life of the housewife, claiming that both states were antithetical to a life of the new, in *All Said and Done*, she rethought the inevitabilities of aging, and certainly did so with respect to their application to herself. See Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 43; and Beauvoir, *Tout compte fait*, 45.

⁹² Beauvoir, *Old Age*, trans. O'Brian (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 422; *La Vieillesse*, 401.

⁹³ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 446, trans. mod; *La Vieillesse*, 424.

⁹⁴ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 450; *La Vieillesse*, 427.

⁹⁵ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 318.

⁹⁶ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 414; *La Vieillesse*, 394.

⁹⁷ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 446.

⁹⁸ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 447; *La Vieillesse*, 424. On repetition, see also (for example) 450, 464.

⁹⁹ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 494; *La Vieillesse*, 468.

education, wealth, status, the expectations of those around them, and a variety of other factors. Beauvoir's consideration of these variations provides a useful lens for reconsidering her engagement with repetition in *The Second Sex*. The potential for a materialist analysis is different in both cases, partly because of the different relations to capital of the (typically unpaid) women considered in *The Second Sex*, and the aged subjects considered in *La Vieillesse*, whose non-participation in a capitalist workforce has different explanations, and different inflections of exclusion. The alienated worker is reduced to what Marx deems near animality because of estrangement from the process and profit of production, whereas unpaid women, as reproductive, are not yet part of the process that would alienate their paid productive activity.¹⁰⁰ The aged, as defined by Beauvoir, have exited that process, if ever they belonged to it.

In *La Vieillesse*, Beauvoir argues, as she had argued of women in *The Second Sex*, that the aged may often live a contradictory and divided existence, remembering that she consistently associates frozen time and repetition with forms of self-division which relate not just to work, but also to the intertwining of disvalue, invisibility (or, stigmatizing or objectifying visibility), and lack of recognition. This reiterates the dilemmas, as overt societal contradictions, previously discussed in relation to race and gender, Beauvoir here noting cases where the aged, through economic impoverishment, "are condemned to poverty, solitude, infirmity and despair" despite the societal "myths of expansion and affluence."¹⁰¹ Sometimes, she notes, the aged are assumed to be part of the social body. Just as easily they are not – they may, for example, be specially targeted and visible as a voting group, or as a group with particular health or pension needs, and yet presented with impoverishing and inferior financial options and health care solutions that compound their association with dilemma, problem, and burden, counteracting an official message of value. They may be both stigmatized and recognized. These messages of inherent contradiction heighten the experience of self-divided existence, and whether consistent, contradictory, or paradoxical, they have been unequally imposed on women and the aged. As she had said of women in 1949, Beauvoir in 1970 took the aged other to be the object of judgement more than the origin of value judgments. Neither women, nor the aged are deemed agents of historical change. A consistent point in her work is the connection she establishes between

¹⁰⁰ This is the argument of Lise Vogel in *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*.

¹⁰¹ Beauvoir, *La Vieillesse*, *Old Age*, 8, trans. mod; *La Vieillesse*, 8.

being the target of judgement, and being less in a position to invent new values.¹⁰²

She associates this condition with a greater temporal stasis. She agrees that a “normally” transcendent subject is *ek-static*, suspended between the past that is constantly being revalued and the future that opens out with acts and values. However, the inhibited capacity to create new values is, she argues, the inhibition of a meaningful future. She associates this inhibited capacity with subordinating, unequal recognition, which simultaneously intersects with economic impoverishment and the cultural meanings of one’s embodiment (for example, as incapable). Her interest in the phenomenon of inhibited capacity has required a conversion of the model according to which all consciousness is transcendence, all existence a kind of commitment, inherently an orientation toward the future, with *ek-stasis* not affected by matters of aging. “Human reality [*la réalité humaine*],” Beauvoir notes, “possesses a two-fold finitude [*est affectée d’une double finitude*]: the one is contingent and it results from facticity – existence has a term imposed on it from without. The other is an ontological structure of the for-itself. In one’s last years both the one and the other become apparent at the same time [*se révèlent ensemble*]; and the one by means of the other.”¹⁰³ Beauvoir’s innovation is the attempt to read together the two kinds of finitude, not allowing that the latter withstands severe transformations in the former with no qualitative change in the animation of one’s projects. Thus contingent finitude can “kill” the capacity for projects that would otherwise be considered a matter of ontology.

We have seen how disproportionate subjection to evaluation and judgement by others, impoverishing the creation of new values, is associated with temporal stasis in *The Second Sex*, allowing for a broadening of the early category of alienation in Marx,¹⁰⁴ adding discussion of the psychic, physical,

¹⁰² It is also a point identified by Fanon, who discusses the association between race subjugation of colonized black Martinicans by the French, and what he considered the loss of value origination. The “black skin white mask” is that colonized individual for whom his or her subjugation has included identifying with the values represented by the colonizer (white, French, bourgeois, metropolitan). See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Paladin, 1970).

¹⁰³ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 420; *La Vieillesse*, 399. With respect to her use of the term “*la réalité humaine*,” again it will be recalled this was the term used to translate in French Heideggerian *Dasein*, and a term both Sartre and Beauvoir modified but picked up from that context.

¹⁰⁴ With her interest in value creation, Beauvoir would seem to be closest to Marx’s description of man’s fashioning an objective world beyond the domain of need (Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 329) through which he proves himself to be species being. He also thereby “contemplates himself in a world he himself has created,” in his estrangement from his “spiritual essence [or being, *Wesen*], his *human* essence” (Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,”

and even affective and energetic aspects. Thus Beauvoir's more elaborate discussion of self-splitting or division converts Marx's being "directed against oneself." Reiterating the interest in repetition as associated with alienation, and broadening the category, Beauvoir discussed women and the aged, who could not be included within an analysis confined to historical dialectic. While the worker's life of repetition contains the capacity, Beauvoir agreed, to pull itself dialectically toward the future, the lives of women and the aged, repetitive in the different senses we have seen, do not. The risks here of a temporal frozenness to which Beauvoir had brought considerable complexity of analysis, appear to be much greater, capable of enhancing her account of the importance of economic solutions.

A distinctive thinker of the temporality of subjugation, Beauvoir grapples again with issues of time and repetition in the context of aging, a process in which, she considers, time is likely to be refused by those who "do not wish to decline."¹⁰⁵ True, the aged may be advanced in years, sometimes physically weakened, sometimes of more limited memory, and thus the lives of repetition and stasis depicted by Beauvoir may seem inexorable.¹⁰⁶

350). However, for the breadth of her references to alienation see *The Second Sex* Fr188–9, 92, 100, 115, 128, 133, 136, 388; II15, 29, 162, 165, 310, 430. In particular, Beauvoir associates "alienation" with an original anxiety with respect to freedom that prompts existents to alienate themselves in things [*choses*] (about which humans may take up a possessive attitude) or in others (about which they may take up a possessive, distancing or depreciating attitude). In both cases, the individual is said to be inauthentically attempting to recuperate one's absence of fixed being through the thing, or the other. Beauvoir adds this diagnosis to Engels' account of the origin of private property, and of the subjection of women, amongst others. Subsequently, Beauvoir offers an account of the woman's experience of alienation from her own depreciated body (Fr1388): the one concept of alienation thereby leading to the other. These accounts of "alienation" draw on psychoanalysis and historical materialism in addition to the notion of original anxiety in the face of freedom. "Alienation" could likely be approached as a further "change-term" in Beauvoir's work (in the sense discussed in chapter one of this work).

¹⁰⁵ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 403; *La Vieillesse*, 384.

¹⁰⁶ For a different approach, though one that sympathetically references Beauvoir's work in *Old Age*, see Iris Marion Young's "A Room of One's Own: Old Age, Extended Care, and Privacy," in *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like A Girl" and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 155–70. Young cites Beauvoir's material to offer a political analysis of the importance of nursing home and hospice reform as well as reform in social attitudes toward seniors, ensuring their access to and autonomy in private spaces, which might reflect a better recognition of the importance of habitual lives. Beauvoir's material, generally troubled by rather than affirmative of repetition, is modulated by Young into a reminder concerning the latter's importance. To this end, Young cites Beauvoir: "an old person who is suddenly transplanted, even if it is only to his children's home, loses his bearings; he is bewildered and often reduced to despair: when they are uprooted like this, one out of two die within years. . . . Clinging to one's habits implies an attachment to one's possessions: the things that belong to us are as it were solidified habits – the mark of certain repetitive forms of appropriate behaviour. The possession of a garden means being able to take one's walk in it every afternoon: this armchair is waiting for me to sit in it every evening" (Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 522, cited by Young, "A Room of One's Own: Old Age, Extended Care, and Privacy," 155–70, 158).

Yet this is not her conclusion, for she stresses that even in cases of physical aging and memory deterioration, matters of recognition and economic conditions may play a critical role in one's relationship to time and value. Aging was, in a sense, the most focused and appropriate case of alterity for her to consider from this perspective.

With her example "the older one grows the faster it runs [*il se précipite à mesure qu'on vieillit*],"¹⁰⁷ Beauvoir therefore suggests, not for reasons relating either to the biology of aging or a linear conception of time, that "time does not flow at the same speed at the different stages of our existence." This is interpreted in terms of changes in "the evaluation of time that occurs between youth and age,"¹⁰⁸ changes thoroughly impregnated with their social, shared meanings. A socially and habitually constituted temporality is always the locus *and object* of our evaluation, with Beauvoir proposing a citation from Ionesco: "habit polishes time – you slip as you do on an overwaxed floor." Thus he comments that he travels "so as to recover a whole, undamaged world upon which time has no hold." Articulating this variability of time, travel can, he says, be a means to "slow down the racing flow [*la précipitation*] of events," and a means of dislodging the different temporalities of habit: "Two days in a new country are worth thirty lived in familiar surroundings, thirty days worn and shortened, spoiled and damaged by habit."¹⁰⁹

Citing this material, Beauvoir's suggestion is not just that time is differently valued, but that time is differently valued by time. In other words, the temporality of habit makes for different valuations of time. Beauvoir interrogates both the contingent *and* the ontological temporal status of the being that differently values time. As she notes, there are "two times" but her argument is that these overlap, leading to Beauvoir's preoccupations with the resulting matters of habit, temporal paralysis, frozen time, and differently generational and temporal experiences of gender in *The Second Sex*.

Exploring this material, Beauvoir must invent the conceptual approach that will allow her to incorporate matters of power and social subordination into an evaluation of the difference of the rhythm of living time for different subjects.¹¹⁰ Again, the issue returns as one of value creation:

¹⁰⁷ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 416; *La Vieillesse*, 396.

¹⁰⁸ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 418; *La Vieillesse*, 397.

¹⁰⁹ *Old Age*, 419, citing Eugène Ionesco, *Journal en miettes* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1967), 15.

¹¹⁰ In "Throwing Like a Girl," Young argues that despite the "depth, clarity and ingenuity" of Beauvoir's "account of the situation of women," Beauvoir "to a large extent fails to give a place to the status and orientation of the woman's body as relating to its surroundings in living action. . . . She discusses how women experience the body as a burden, how . . . puberty . . . menstruation and pregnancy, are felt to be fearful and mysterious, and she claims that these phenomena weigh down the woman's

The radical difference between the point of view [*l'optique*] of the old person and that of the child or adolescent is that the first has discovered his finitude [*finitude*] whereas at the beginning of his life he was unaware of it: in those days he saw such manifold and such undefined possibilities lying before him that they seemed limitless; in order to receive them the future into which they were projected broadened [*se dilatait*] to infinity. The young people of today realize early that society has prefabricated their future, but many dream of escaping from the system or even of destroying it, and this leaves a wide field open to their imagination.¹¹¹

Beauvoir links the relationship to time in part to the imaginative and transformative relationship one has to one's environment. Suggesting that time can move with a richer relationship to infinity for the child or adolescent, Beauvoir associates this with the sense of limitless unknown possibilities and the sense that one's context could perhaps be escaped or thoroughly transformed. By contrast, she discusses the phenomenon in which there is an absence of that sense – when the subject's experience is that there are few possibilities and one's context is little subject to change by one's imaginative enthusiasms. This alters one's temporality, and one's relationship to temporality. This point becomes clear in the following passage, in which class differentially returns:

At some given point, a moment that comes sooner or later according to the class to which one belongs, an individual finds oneself obliged to reproduce one's life [*astreint à reproduire sa vie*]: one is the prisoner of one's calling [*enfermé dans son*

existence by tying her to nature, immanence, and the requirements of the species. By largely ignoring the situatedness of the woman's actual bodily movement and orientation to its surroundings and its world, Beauvoir tends to create the impression that it is woman's anatomy and physiology as such that at least in part determines her unfree status," 29. There is considerable debate about whether Beauvoir thinks that female embodiment is an inherent impediment to women, and see note 34 for Moi's argument that this is an erroneous impression heightened by the faults in the English translation. This debate notwithstanding (and although one can think of exceptions), Young may be correct that Beauvoir's attention to female body experience focuses somewhat less on the experiences of female bodies moving through space and interacting with the world, interior and exterior environments. Beauvoir's analysis offers the resources to describe and account for the phenomenon of "throwing like a girl," yet it is Young who locates and amplifies these elements. By contrast, Beauvoir's material on aged bodies offers more focus on embodied interaction with the environment. There is, moreover, an equivalent in the late work to Young's description of "throwing," which we might think of as "timing." With respect to temporality, Beauvoir's work describes a kind of "timing like the aged," which, as we will see in Chapter 4, can also be extended to the question of "timing like a girl." Both *The Second Sex* and *La Vieillesse* describe differently embodied and recognized subjects whose socialized and subjective embodiment bear complex relationships to temporality. See Young, "Throwing Like A Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality," in *Throwing Like Girl! and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 141–60.

¹¹¹ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 419–20; Beauvoir, *La Vieillesse*, 399, trans. mod.

métier], and one sees one's world draw in, one's projects grow fewer in number [*l'individu . . . voit son univers se rétrécir, ses projets se raréfier*].¹¹²

And although Beauvoir goes on to associate the shortness of the years to come with this sense of the world drawing in and with a change in the very "quality" of the future (*l'avenir se transforme qualitativement*)¹¹³:

The old person, for his part, knows that his life is accomplished [*sa vie est faite*] and that he will never refashion it [*il ne la referra pas*]. The future is no longer big [*gonflée*] with promise: it contracts to accord with the finite being who must live it [*il se contracte à la mesure de l'être fini qui a à le vivre*].¹¹⁴

A limited [*borné*] future and a frozen [*figé*] past: such is the situation that the elderly have to face up to. In many situations it paralyzes their activity.¹¹⁵

Beauvoir stresses that the determining issue here is not the mere matter of the finite number of years remaining according to the subject, but the capacity for meaning attribution in one's relation to those years, and this is a matter greatly charged by questions of social depreciation, recognition, contradiction, and division from oneself – the issues of concern to Beauvoir. The preoccupation with the conditions for creation is clear in what otherwise seems an erroneous privileging of the intellectual:

Intellectual workers are less troubled by their physiological decline than the rest. A certain number enjoy a unique autonomy in their relationship with society; these are the creators. There are not a great many of them, but because of their privileged position they are, as it were, touchstones or detectors [*des révélateurs*]: [by them we may judge] what is practically possible for an elderly man when he is given the maximum of opportunity. [They help us to see] what is the nature of the relationship between age and fruitfulness [*fécondité*] in the various intellectual and artistic fields, and they tell us how we are to understand it.¹¹⁶

To be sure, this will be perceived as an odd comment – she had particularly used a group of writers, including Flaubert, to discuss an association of aging with (occasional) loss of creativity, innovation, energy, and interest in

¹¹² Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 420; *La Vieillesse*, 399, trans. mod.

¹¹³ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 421; *La Vieillesse*, 400.

¹¹⁴ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 420; *La Vieillesse*, 399, trans. mod.

¹¹⁵ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 421; *La Vieillesse*, 400, trans. mod.

¹¹⁶ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 430–1, trans. mod.; *La Vieillesse*, 409. The translator has added the clauses in brackets; thus the original passage is: "*leur situation privilégiée fait d'eux des révélateurs: quelles sont les possibilités pratiques d'un homme âgé quand un maximum de chances lui est accordé? Quel est, dans les divers domaines intellectuels et artistiques, le rapport de l'âge et de la fécondité, et comment le comprendre?*"

the new.¹¹⁷ Beauvoir implies in the above passage that “intellectual workers” are one of the most immune categories in this respect. The critical issue for Beauvoir concerns the conditions of creativity, and one’s capacity to create new values. Here, the temporary focus on the intellectual’s particular kind of creativity is emblematic of what Beauvoir considers to be vital in all humans.

As we saw in [Chapter 1](#), Beauvoir draws both on concepts of consciousness as “choosing” (negating) freedom and consciousness as the disclosure of new meaning. As a result, it is plausible for her to conclude that a socially located, embodied consciousness may not be in the optimal circumstances for the maximal disclosure of new kinds of meanings. Beauvoir links this question to an interest in social and political reform. She asks under what social and economic conditions disclosed meanings are likely to be more innovative. What social conditions maximally proliferate inventive existences? Unlike ontological freedom, which is abstracted from this question, Beauvoir’s question is open to differentials of class, wealth, recognition, status, and practical choice. As before, Beauvoir avails herself of an alternative to the bare, and less useful argument, that the aged are “free” to choose their old age. She argues with equal vigor that the aged are *not* necessarily more repetitive or less vital. Yet, for the social and economic reasons she discusses, *they may well be*. The two rhetorical stresses, complementary and yet pulling against each other in terms of the emphasis they receive in *La Vieillesse*, are of equal importance to her argument.

¹¹⁷ See notes 71–3.

CHAPTER 4

Conversions of Alterity: Race, Sex, Age

A troubling characteristic of much contemporary feminist theory is its failure to take seriously the intertwining of sexism with other forms of oppression. . . . [I]n de Beauvoir's work, we have all the essential elements of a feminist account of "women's lives" that would not conflate "woman" with a small group of women – namely white middle-class heterosexual Christian women in Western countries. Yet Beauvoir ends up producing an account which does just that.

Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman*

In [Chapter 2](#), we saw that American race relations and the race theorists with whom Beauvoir was acquainted provided an instigation for some of the more novel aspects of the methodology she would bring to sex and gender relations. While one might therefore have expected that in analyzing sex and gender Beauvoir would not be forgetful of the differentials of race, they are occluded in *The Second Sex*, notwithstanding the parallels and comparisons explicitly proposed by the author with respect to sex and race subordination. However, I also proposed a reading, in [Chapter 1](#), willing to consider not only Beauvoir's imaginative role in converting a body of theorists in her day, but also, in a productive sense, the possibility of an ongoing resistance of some theorists to her conversions. Such resistance can again be imagined with respect to her treatment of race. Moreover, an auto-resistance implicit in Beauvoir's work can also be suggested through the lens of her late writing, particularly in its treatment of a further form of subordination concerning aging.

SEX AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

Elizabeth Spelman's *Inessential Women*¹ discusses the limitations in Beauvoir's work relating to her depiction of racial and cultural difference

¹ Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

in *The Second Sex*. The inconsistencies become that much more interesting when considered in the context of earlier work such as *America Day by Day* and in the context of her late work, *La Vieillesse*. A perception Beauvoir confronts in *America Day by Day* seems not to carry over into *The Second Sex*: that a country is constituted through immigration and a diversity of traditions and is (as she says of the United States) a “heterogeneity of cultures.”² What happens to that perception? The heterogeneity will be considered an aggregate of self-identical groups, abstracted from each other, and in addition, women will be considered one more of these groups. Though describing America as a battlefield,³ she characterizes “Americans” or “American women” as if they are homogenous. These characterizations do not reflect her recognition of cultural heterogeneity, and in this regard, *America Day by Day* will prove a precedent for some problematic aspects of the depiction of cultural difference in *The Second Sex*.

The encounters Beauvoir has with racial and cultural difference in *America Day by Day* take place “elsewhere” and within communities described as in some ways self-enclosed. She describes her encounters with African Americans in Harlem; in a jazz club in which she is the only white person present; and in neighborhoods within towns in the American South; as well as encounters with Spanish, Mexican, and Native Americans within communities in New Mexico.⁴ These last are resistant exchanges imagined between entities opaque to each other. Beauvoir expresses frustration at her inability to grasp an other deemed alien, and frustration at impediments to action:

It’s difficult to make out what’s going on behind those young brown foreheads. . . . We stand up and discover that the well is a kiva, a supremely sacred place. . . . We have violated the boundaries assigned to whites . . . a man from the top of a terrace signals to us to retrace our steps. . . . It’s forbidden to walk here, too. . . . All these restrictions annoy us [*ces défenses nous ennuyent*].⁵

² Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, trans. Carol Cosman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 348 (see also her description of Chicago at 359ff and 372); Beauvoir, *L’Amérique au jour le jour 1947* (Paris: Gallimard [Folio], 1997), 478 (see also 493ff and 511).

³ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 389; *L’Amérique au jour le jour*, 535.

⁴ See for example *America Day by Day*, 34–9, 352–3, 189–93; *L’Amérique au jour le jour*, 49–57, 483–6, 266–71. Her time spent with Richard Wright is in some ways an exception; she describes his exclusion or marginalization within environments she is enjoying, the negative attention he attracts, and the negativity that she and Wright’s (white) wife encounter as his companion.

⁵ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 192; *L’Amérique au jour le jour*, 269–70. On similar passages, see also Debra Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), for whom Beauvoir’s account of

Notwithstanding the stereotype of cultural inscrutability, Beauvoir has a habit of referring to a range of cultural differences as if they don't resist her powers of perception.⁶ In *The Second Sex*, different cultures are authoritatively depicted, though again described as self-enclosed and rhetorically "elsewhere," in the sense that she refers to the sexual character or *mœurs* concerning women in Scandinavia, Italy, and Spain⁷; among "Arabs and the Indians and in many rural populations"⁸; of Arab peoples in the Muslim world (she does not mean within France, giving her observations in Tunisia as an example)⁹; and of Jews of Biblical times, but again, not within contemporary France.¹⁰ She also refers in this work to American women without discussing race differences,¹¹ and to African Americans without specifying sex.¹² Her references to contemporary French women are sometimes differentiated based on class, generation, and sexuality. In other words, she distinguishes some issues as specific to working-class or bourgeois women, or heterosexual and lesbian relationships, and devotes separate chapters to the differential interpellations of the femininity of young girls, as well as middle-aged and older women. But the women depicted in these chapters are racially and culturally homogeneous, even when she discusses other cultures. For example, whether Beauvoir is discussing a "French," "Spanish," or "Tunisian" woman in *The Second Sex*, she refers to some kind of cultural distinctiveness (rather than, for example, considering Muslim and Jewish French women, or indeed, the way that one may be divided between several cultural identities). In *America Day by Day*, Beauvoir discusses both American "Jews" and American "women," but not Jewish American women. Being othered culturally occurs to a subject who visits a different community within a country (as with Beauvoir's peregrinations to Native and African American communities), or another country, but not because a

pitied the women of Turkey alerts us "to the dangers of bringing Western eyes to non-Western realities. Beauvoir did not seem to suspect that she might not fully understand what she saw,"³⁷.

⁶ Beauvoir acknowledged the weaknesses of her book about China; see Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1964), 332 and 344–5.

⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US379; UK400; FrII139.

⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US526; UK541–2; *Le deuxième sexe*, FrII342.

⁹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US84; UK115; FrII136.

¹⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US85; UK116; FrII137.

¹¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US390, xx; UK410, 14; FrII154, I, 13.

¹² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US297, 331; UK325, 354; Fr II47, 83. One exception to these references to white American women and African American men is seen in her account of the extreme exposure of African American women to sexual abuse by white men of the American south (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US374; UK396; FrII134).

subject is constituted of different kinds of cultural experiences, traditions, and affiliations.

Conceptually, Beauvoir does not consider the plurality of race and cultural differences as mediating, dividing, or fragmenting a subject in an ongoing way. Subjects are culturally separated from each other just as self-enclosed communities and neighborhoods within cities and countries exist side by side. Perhaps this is why it seems plausible to Beauvoir to depict an encounter that a woman or man can have “as” women or men,¹³ as if the intersections of each with race and culture wait politely outside the door while their exchange as “sexed” takes place.¹⁴ Beauvoir rejects the notion of “unchangeably fixed entities that would determine given characteristics,” such as those ascribed to race or sex. But she somehow imagines us being made, becoming, or reacting separately, with the identities of Jewish, black, women, French, American. These identities aren’t on her model autonomous of “the other” but they are misleadingly treated as if autonomous of each other (in other words, as if abstractable from all the different kinds of relevant others and alterities),¹⁵ and in particular, sex remains autonomous of race. Reinforcing this impression is the issue Beauvoir raises several times in *The Second Sex*, about the possible analogies between racism and sexism, as when she compares the treatment or status of women to that of African Americans, as if these are separate

¹³ This is Spelman’s intervention in the context of an overall argument in *Inessential Woman* that the category of gender divorced from race and cultural difference is simply incoherent. She stresses the importance of understanding Beauvoir in terms of that remarkable conceptual oversight, in many respects an inexplicable aspect of her work, in addition to the more positive aspects of her legacy.

¹⁴ A formulation to note: “Negroes coming to France from Africa also find difficulties . . . similar to those confronting women.” Here Beauvoir acknowledges the intersection of a nation and its colonialism while failing to discuss French African women (*The Second Sex*, US698; UK707; FrII54r).

¹⁵ My intention is to indicate some instability in her writing in this respect, but certainly not to imply that Beauvoir is definitively committed to a vision of culture and communities as independent of each other. Julien Murphy notes the importance of Beauvoir’s writings on Algeria for the development of a revised vision of “the moral basis for intersubjectivity in Beauvoir’s ethics, particularly her writings on the [Algerian] war,” 285. As Murphy notes, Beauvoir found her French national identity to be intolerable, imbricated as it was in the violence of colonialism. Perhaps her response, though certainly one of horror, suggests the persistence of Beauvoir’s self-preoccupied encounters with question of race, culture, cultural difference, and colonialism. (Murphy cites Beauvoir’s response to the Algerian war as described in *Force of Circumstance*: “I felt the war inside me again”; “all wars, all the things that divide us, that tear us apart. . .”). Still, as Murphy notes, it took Beauvoir in the direction of a stronger definition of cultural and colonial intertwining, and crystallized a view that “the moral and political content of subjectivities is constituted through our bonds with others,” 285. See Murphy, “Beauvoir and the Algerian War: Toward a Postcolonial Ethics,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (University Park: State University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 263–97.

groups.¹⁶ These discussions suggest Beauvoir's view that race and sex can be separated.¹⁷

Spelman has offered an important reading of this separation as conceptually nonsensical in Beauvoir's work. It is, moreover, a startling missed opportunity in the context of Beauvoir's own material on ambiguity, the very term in the name of which she affirms being simultaneously subject and other, subject and object, facticity and transcendence, historical and nonhistorical, body-subject and body-object, unpredictable and a sedimented, habitual body. Her simultaneous interests in class, race, cultural difference, and sex should have added a vital inflection to her interest in ambiguity, and the resources for such a reconsideration were already embedded in her work, offering unmined further potential for the term's significance. Yet neither in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, nor in *The Second Sex* does Beauvoir use ambiguity as a means of thinking about what it means to be simultaneously both sexed and raced. These existences may not always conflict with each other, but they may well do so, as with the white woman objectified as a woman but empowered as white, or the black man empowered as male but subject to racism. These are experiences of coinciding privilege and subordination, and in some cases they may also be experiences of simultaneously marginalizing others and being marginalized, rendering others invisible and being invisible, making others conspicuous while being conspicuous. Thus, to return to Beauvoir's definition of ambiguity, the conflicting realities of race and sex offer the possibility of further, and highly nuanced senses in which one might be simultaneously subject and object, being-for-itself and being-for-others, subordinate and subordinating. It is conspicuous that this point escaped her focus, given her multiple interests in race, sex, and class.

RESISTANCES

Many of the race theorists in whom Beauvoir was interested, both before and after the period of *The Second Sex*, have themselves been interrogated, sometimes very critically, from a feminist perspective. Nonetheless, one could certainly offer a reading of elements in their work that offered the potential to resist Beauvoir's conflicted tendency to separate sex and race with an attunement to their overlappings. There is a connection, in

¹⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US698, 116, 128, xxix, 209, 297; UK707, 147, 159, 23, 240, 325; Fr196, 216, 24, 324; II, 541, 47.

¹⁷ I will discuss material on aging in which she seems to pull back from such separations.

Richard Wright's *Native Son*, between Bigger Thomas's race frustration and the charged appeal of Mary Dalton as wealthy, white, and female, empowered but vulnerable to sexual violence, and the similar vulnerability of Bessie, neither white nor rich.¹⁸ Beauvoir had worked her way assiduously through Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma*, which included discussions of W. E. B. Du Bois, Charles S. Johnson, and African American novelists, writers whose treatment of the intersections of sex and race should have held the potential to prompt Beauvoir's reconsideration of their implicit separation in her theoretical work. *American Dilemma* included extensively footnoted discussions of African American literature such as Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*; Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; the publications of Du Bois, Alain Locke, Booker T. Washington, Ralph Bunche, and Charles S. Johnson; and an appendix on parallels between race and sex subordination in America,¹⁹ which described Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk* as "an ardent appeal" on behalf of women's interests as well as those of African Americans.²⁰ Of all the African American literature cited by Myrdal, only Wright is directly mentioned in *The Second Sex*.²¹ The section in *The Second Sex* analyzing the "myth of woman in five authors" chose for the task Montherlant, D. H. Lawrence, Claudel, Breton, and Stendhal.²² Unlike

¹⁸ Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969). Hayes interprets Bigger's attitudes toward the women in terms of his deep resentment: "he is not remorseful for his crimes; rather, he expresses hatred for the dead white woman and indifference toward the black girlfriend he murdered." See Floyd W. Hayes, III, "Fanon, Oppression, and Resentment: The Black Experience in the United States," in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, eds. Lewis. R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Renée. T. White (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 11–23, 20.

¹⁹ Attributed to Alva Myrdal; see Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race and the Origins of Existentialism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 170.

²⁰ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), 1076.

²¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US698; UK706–7; FrII540. Beauvoir suggests that *Black Boy* demonstrates that the situation of race is usefully compared to that of women: "Richard Wright has shown how the ambitions of a young American Negro are blocked from the start and what a struggle he had merely in raising himself to the level where problems began to be posed for the whites. Negroes coming to France from Africa also find difficulties – with themselves as well as around them – similar to those confronting women." Despite the importance of sex relations to *Native Son*, Beauvoir coopts the Wright novel into a parallel with women's situation, as opposed to an instance of the representation of women's situation: what Bigger Thomas "feels with bitterness at the dawn of his life is this definitive inferiority, this accursed alterity, which is written in the color of his skin: he sees aeroplanes flying by and he knows that because he is black the sky is forbidden him. Because she is a woman, the little girl knows that she is forbidden the sea and polar regions, a thousand adventures, a thousand joys: she was born on the wrong side of the line [*elle est née du mauvais côté*]" (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US297–8; UK325; FrII47. Again note her appropriation of a language appropriate to race contexts, discussed in Myrdal 668–93.

²² If one is interested in further resources within Beauvoir's work containing the potential to open up her project to unexplored dialogues, one can also note the one appearance of Léopold Sédar Senghor in a footnote (cut from the English translation) of the Myths section. Beauvoir cites two

those writers, *American Dilemma*'s extensive references to African American literature alone could, like its body of theoretical works, have prompted from Beauvoir a complex analysis not only of the situation of women and of myths of femininity, but also of the mutual imbrications of sex with race.

The resources of Myrdal's *American Dilemma* are enfolded within *The Second Sex*, constituting a virtual reserve within her work. Making mention of a greater diversity of African-American writers than appears in *The Second Sex*, it is a reserve offering unexplored possibilities with the potential to resist and tacitly challenge the use she did make of Myrdal. This use could be seen as an excess to her writing, containing resources for questioning some of her suppositions.

AUTO-RESISTANCES

In Chapter 3 I argued that Beauvoir's work both depicts sedimented patterns of gender role repetition (to return to the formulation, Beauvoir does suppose that repetition is repetition) and provides the resources for a more complex view of that repetition (the diversity of the illustrations she selects indicates that repetition is never just repetition). Similarly, it would be possible to mine Beauvoir's work for resources, even if neglected by the author (and also meager compared to those discussed in the case of repetition), to bring a more complex thinking of ambiguity in relation to the intersections of sex and race.

While many of her formulations that concern race, sex, and cultural difference reflect Beauvoir supposing that sex and race could be conceptually separated, there are elements that resist such a position, or which could be used to pit some of Beauvoir's conclusions against others. While not always drawing the conclusions that may seem evident to the reader, some of Beauvoir's parallels of sex with race relations do suggest instead the mutual inflections of sex and race. The scrutiny to which Wright is

poems by Senghor, critically, as instances of the type of reciprocity of representation in which seas and mountains (as, for example, resistant challenges, contexts for modes of mastery, domination or possession) are likened to women, all the while that women are likened to seas and mountains (Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe* II256). Giving a clear account of this ubiquitous, "reciprocal" level of myth, she then goes on to mention Senghor's associative evocation of pure horizons and savannah caressed by winds, ecstasies of dark wine, the naked woman. In a second piece Senghor speaks of a tamed Africa, a Congo that is "femme par ma tête, par ma langue . . . par mon ventre." Beauvoir does not mention the complexities of double conquering (the relationship between the colonized Africa of concern to Senghor in addition to the feminine metaphors of concern to Beauvoir) embedded in the citations. A more complex implicit conversation between Senghor and Beauvoir could be envisaged, the important complications tacitly indicated as the resonances of colonization in Senghor's work exceed the uses Beauvoir makes of it, given her focus on myths of femininity.

subjected in Beauvoir's *America Day by Day* is inflected by the fact that he is a black man accompanied by two white women.²³ Mockery and indifference in a bus in the south takes on a different status when directed at an African American woman who is pregnant and sick (the courtesies sometimes extended by strangers to pregnant women in a public space is withheld from her and replaced with contempt)²⁴; thus, this incident illustrates sex inflecting the racism. Beauvoir claims at one point in *The Second Sex* that white American women of the South could be among the most passionate defenders of slavery, arguing (in an apparently half-hearted attempt to consider the intersections of sex and race relations), "they seek to compensate for their inactivity."²⁵ She mentions also that the sex subordination of young white girls is complicated when it comes to their imbrication in regimes of race contempt.²⁶ Even though, as Spelman has noted, she appears oblivious of the implications, she briefly mentions in *The Second Sex* the sexualized racism of white women in America, the white racist depiction of black women and men as sexually suspect (in different ways), the deployment within hostile race relations of perceptions of white women as sexually vulnerable, and the differentials of sex subordination inflecting racist perceptions of interracial sex.²⁷ In discussing gender in *America Day by Day*, Beauvoir portrays American women of the Forties as presenting themselves as the object of spectacle,²⁸ orienting themselves toward visual appeal. Yet she disconnects this discussion from her disturbed²⁹ material on the racism toward and segregation of African Americans during the same period, about whom she reminds that they are likely to lose any battle of "looks." Furthermore, while women are scrutinized as sexualized or aesthetic objects of a male viewer, and in this sense are incited to be (appropriately) conspicuous, Beauvoir neglects the implications of her own perception that African Americans are also required by whites to be (appropriately) inconspicuous. Sexuality is appropriate for the

²³ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 37. ²⁴ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 233.

²⁵ Beauvoir, *Second Sex* US601; UK612; FrII426–7.

²⁶ Again, an example from Spelman: "She later makes clear that a white girl growing up in the United States hardly believes that Black men are superior to her" (*Inessential Woman*, 63).

²⁷ "The savagely racist American men of the South have always been permitted by the mores to sleep with black women, before the Civil War as today, and they make use of this right with lordly arrogance; but a white woman who had commerce with a black in slavery days would have been put to death, and today she would probably be lynched" (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US374; UK396; FrII134).

²⁸ Beauvoir, *America Day By Day*, 50.

²⁹ Gail Weiss describes it, perhaps more sympathetically, as a visceral reaction, in "Challenging Choices: An Ethics of Oppression," in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir. Critical Essays*, ed. Simons (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 241–61, 256.

object of the sexualized look, but not – or differently so – for the object of the racializing look. Standing out visually may be appropriate for the white women she describes, but very differently so for African Americans in a racist context. Though both are rendered objects, women may be marginalized as visible, African Americans as invisible, and the paradox Beauvoir might have considered is the contradictory demands on African American women in this context to be both visible and invisible, sexed and non-sexed. Again, the material speaks to the concept of ambiguity with its capacity to state radically contradictory and conflicting, coinciding expectations and existences. At the same time, the complexities of her material call to just such a reading, describing acutely self-contradictory becomings, divided by multiple fields of engagement in subordination and plural, fractured existences.

DIFFERENTIATIONS OF AGING

These are among the limited resources upon which one could draw within Beauvoir's material on sex in order to ask how it was internally contested by her fragmentary writing on race. But race and gender were not the only formations of alterity she considered. In raising the possibility that elements of Beauvoir's work could and should be used to counter her more monolithic accounts of gender, one of the distinctive and promising elements is her sensitivity to issues of age othering and generational difference. As ever, this material is also not without its problems, and Beauvoir has a tendency to reiterate stereotypes about aging – to the consternation of some of her readers when she autobiographically expressed her anxieties.³⁰ Nonetheless,

³⁰ Beauvoir depicts, in *She Came to Stay*, a narrator who discovers (so to speak) that certain possibilities are now closed to her: she will never be a good dancer, for example. Merleau-Ponty also writes, uncritical of the sentiment of, "a thirty-year-old woman, a mature woman, to whom many things are already irrevocably impossible – who, for example, will never be able to dance well" (Merleau-Ponty, "Metaphysics and the Novel," trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, in *Sense and Non-Sense* [Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964], 33). Describing the age of forty-four, Beauvoir mentions anxiety attacks about "the horrors of declining age." Describing forty-six, she writes, "death had become an intimate presence," and that she was suffering the subjection of old age (Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 285, 453). Describing herself in her mid-fifties, Beauvoir said she was loathe to recognize herself in the mirror, "attacked by the pox of time for which there is no cure." Aging, she wrote, was the most important and irreparable thing to have happened to her since 1944, the mutilation (*mutilation*) for which she could discern no compensation (Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 656, 653). Though see Chapter 3, notes 87 and 91, for a subsequent reconsideration. This material is addressed further in my "Bodies, Lost and Found: Simone de Beauvoir from *The Second Sex* to *Old Age*," in *Radical Philosophy* 96 (July/August, 1999): 6–16; and "Beauvoir's Old Age," in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Claudia Card (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 286–304.

the question of aging provoked in Beauvoir a more thoroughgoing interest in the ways in which gendered identity can be qualified, mediated, or interrupted by other variations of alterity than she otherwise accomplished. There is in Beauvoir's work a "virtual" conversion of ambiguity that could be accomplished by allowing her own writing on aging to act as a differential with respect to her writing on sex, gender, and perhaps also race. Her philosophical reflections on the significance of aging would take Beauvoir most thoroughly toward a reconsidered view of ambiguity. Certainly, they would allow her a much broader field of material within which to identify subjects as simultaneously subject and object, being-for-itself and being-for-others, and, as she would claim, old and young. In addition, however, it was in the context of aging that Beauvoir came closest to a reconsideration of what, today, we would call the identity categories in question. It is in the context of aging that Beauvoir, having argued that "old" is the other, and insisting on the realities of aging, also offers sufficient material to suggest that there may be no coherently abstractable "old age." This is not to be equated with the position that there is no such thing as old age, which is evidently not Beauvoir's position.³¹ Instead, the suggestion would be that old age cannot be coherently abstracted from the web constituted by matters of class, wealth, health, race, culture, sex, work, opportunity, occupation. Beauvoir arrives most coherently, and with the most conviction, at this kind of analysis through her considerations of age. Although it does not occur to her to do so, the method can – again through an exploration of the possibilities of auto-resistance within Beauvoir's own work – be used as a device for a similar analysis of gender and of race.

IS THERE "GENDER"?

Considered in the light of Beauvoir's later work, and particularly when compared to her failure to address directly the differentials of gender in the context of race, it is noticeable that the experiences of sex and gender depicted in *The Second Sex* vary so significantly depending on one's age. *The Second Sex* is the first of Beauvoir's works in which the concern manifests, and its first expression is simply the detailed attention directed at the differently aged experiences of sex and gender. True, the worrying tendency to consider common the experiences of a given group (in this case a particular age group) is present, but the experiences of these ages are so specific as to suggest that care has been taken toward the variations and their variables.

³¹ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1977), 7.

Both “grouping” and differentiating, Beauvoir discusses the way in which we become female from the earliest age: as infants we are already responding to the sexually orienting world of other humans.³² The conflict a girl experiences between her impulses to action and being rewarded for pleasing may make her seek a more confirming objectification by the outside world.³³ Female puberty is overdetermined as an experience of shame but is also a time of intense relationships and solidarities between teenage girls.³⁴ Young women are, in Beauvoir’s view, often not sufficiently confident, independent, uninhibited, or realistic to enjoy their first or ongoing experiences of heterosexual sex.³⁵ Married women who do work in the home are isolated and confronted with the unrewarding and Sisyphus-like tasks of housework; a husband’s tendency may be to infantilize his wife, while the wife may, for her part, seek to manage her spouse indirectly.³⁶ She lacks equal institutional identity: “She has no gainful occupation, no legal capacities [*pas de capacités*], no personal relations, even her name is hers no longer; she is nothing but her husband’s ‘half.’”³⁷ Marriage is a “complex mixture of affection [*d’attachement*] and resentment, hate, constraint [*de consigne*], resignation, dullness [*de paresse*], and hypocrisy.”³⁸ Beauvoir’s constant theme is incited passivity but its modalities change. The young girl accepts a passive role and a passive future.³⁹ Her experience of her sexuality is of a more passive (and vaguely guilty) physicality and desire.⁴⁰ Many young women value love and marriage more than careers and independence of interests.⁴¹ By contrast, older women may believe they have lost value, rather than seeing themselves as the agents of value. They may experience a particular feeling of uselessness, dehumanization, or exposure to disrespect.⁴²

³² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US268; UK296; FrII14.

³³ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US279; UK306–7; FrII25–7.

³⁴ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US306–8; UK332–5, 366–369; Fr II57–63, 96–101. In another of the curious combinations of differentiation and generalization, Beauvoir claims that by contrast, married women often don’t have genuine friendships with other adult women (*The Second Sex*, US544; UK558; FrII363).

³⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US380–2; UK400–2; FrII139–42.

³⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US478, 451, 460, 464, 468; UK496, 470, 479, 483, 487; FrII284, 235–6, 255, 261–2, 268–9.

³⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US469; UK487; FrII269.

³⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US473; UK491; FrII275.

³⁹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US298; UK325; FrII47.

⁴⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US322, 327; UK346, 351; FrII73–4, 79.

⁴¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US431, 329, 369; UK451, 352, 390; FrII201, 80–1, 127.

⁴² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US575, 580, 584; UK587, 591, 596; FrII399, 404, 409. Though Beauvoir also argues that sometimes an older woman is “freed from her chains” – from the expectation to be feminine (*The Second Sex*, US583; UK595; FrII408).

If the formations according to which girls and women are othered vary considerably according to their age, one might be tempted to conclude that there is no “non-aged” sex, that is to say, no sex without its age specificity. Famous as she is for the claim that women are (always) the “other,” the above examples stress how differently they are the other, and some elements of her argument allow for a questioning of the generalized formulation. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that aging can be more painful for women than men, because they are valued for fecundity and beauty. If a woman has identified with her objectification, her old age may be the more devastating for her. But in *La Vieillesse*, Beauvoir concentrates on the specific ways in which aging is particularly devastating for men. If, for example with retirement, they lose the professional and public activity that they might believe had distinguished them from those without such status – a category in which they might include a disproportion of women, and perhaps their spouse – Beauvoir suggests the experience can amount to being severed from the valued aspects of masculinity:

When he loses his abilities [*ses capacités*] he appears as other [*il apparaît comme autre*]; becoming, and to a far more radical extent than a woman, a mere object. She is necessary to society whereas he is of no worth at all. He has neither exchange, nor reproductive, nor productive value [*ni monnaie d'échange, ni reproducteur, ni producteur*], he is no longer anything but a burden.⁴³

One could conclude that there are no relations between simply “males” and “females”: if there is no sex without age, we need to know their age, whose specificity will inflect their encounters. Beauvoir does not say there are no “males,” or “females,” to be sure, but her material does imply that being male or female is barely a meaningful or intrinsically coherent identity if not understood in terms of the differentials she does detail. Once Beauvoir

⁴³ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 100 (trans. mod); Beauvoir, *La Vieillesse*, 98. Adding the suggestion that the problem of the aged “belongs strictly to the active adults,” it is here that she reiterates the formulation she had first borrowed from Myrdal, and used in *The Second Sex* in the 1940s, that the so called “negro problem” is a white problem, to which she had subsequently added the view that “the woman problem has always been a man’s problem” (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US128; UK159; FR1216; and see Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), xlvii. See also Oliver Davis for his discussion of Beauvoir’s account of the aging man. Beauvoir, as he points out, mentions further aspects of the severing of men from a valued masculinity – such as new anxieties over the unreliability of the penis that serves as his “alter ego [*alter ego*]” (*Old Age* 358; *La Vieillesse* 341). Despite this material, Beauvoir does not overtly pursue, as he notes, possible parallels between the female and old body, only minimally discusses (though the topic is not entirely neglected) the “relationship between sexism and ageism,” and, most noticeably, offers an account of aging which is “overwhelmingly concerned with the situation of older men.” Davis offers a thoughtful consideration of some of the peculiarities of the work. See Oliver Davis, *Age Rage and Going Gently: Stories of the Senescent Subject in Twentieth-Century French Writing* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), 49–50.

embarks on this kind of view, she consolidates it with her attention to the relationship between aging and class.

If an older man without means ceases to work, she argues, he loses the economic independence and the role of provider that may have, according to his context, distinguished him from many women.⁴⁴ Women may maintain their domestic, household authority, whereas men may lose all authority. Thus age intersects with class and wealth:

All known civilizations are marked by the contrast between an exploiting class and the classes of the exploited. The words old age cover two profoundly different kinds of reality according to whether they are applied to the one or to the other. What distorts our view of the whole is that . . . it is the upper classes [*des eupatrides*] alone that speak, and until the nineteenth century they spoke only of themselves.⁴⁵

Particularly because of the relationship between recognition and economic independence, the alterity of aging is different according to economic status. A wealthy older man or woman has better prospects of being respected:

Today and throughout history, the class-struggle governs the manner in which old age takes hold of a man: there is a great gulf between the aged slave and the aged patrician [*l'eupatride*], between the wretchedly pensioned ex-worker and an Onassis. . . . Any statement that claims to deal with old age as a whole must be challenged, for it tends to hide this chasm.⁴⁶

Presumably, the same point should be made with respect to dealing with gender “as a whole.” We start to imagine, hypothetically, the prospects for Beauvoir to make this kind of revised conclusion with respect to the *Second Sex* material, as we see her finding she must modify her position, even as it is presented in *La Vieillesse*, that old age is the other. It is, she claims, not clear there is a conceptually coherent “old age” without its class and economic specificity.

Consider the possible comparisons with *The Second Sex*. Once questions of class and age are admitted, we hear, as we should, of girls who engage in practices of othering; and these depictions allow for a thinking of ambiguity more comprehensively accessing the resources that Beauvoir’s work offers. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir depicts young girls as rendered passive, subtly objectified, and constrained with respect to boys, and with puberty, rendered an object of some sexual shame. But in *La Vieillesse*, Beauvoir describes something different:

Children are taught to respect the aged. Yet if they belong to the lower classes the child often tends to make fun of them, taking his revenge upon the whole

⁴⁴ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 301. ⁴⁵ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 240; *La Vieillesse*, 226–7.

⁴⁶ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 16–7; *La Vieillesse*, 16–7.

oppressive adult world in the person of this weakened, peculiar and degraded [*déchu, affaibli et bizarre*] grownup. I remember at *La Grillère* how my cousins, imitated by my sister and me, used to make fun of their old educators [*leurs vieux précepteurs*]; because of their social inferiority the grownups watched us indulgently, without reproof.⁴⁷

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir had certainly particularized the class of the women whose situation she described. She had written of the intersections of class and sex, and of class hostility between women.⁴⁸ But when this passage from *La Vieillesse* mentions revenge, it suggests that one kind of subordination, in this case sex, can inflect another kind of subordination: subordination inciting subordination. The fact that a young child, and in particular a young girl, is the object of restrictions and scrutiny imbued with sexual connotations she vaguely grasps, obviously doesn't mean that she won't taunt or humiliate another, and may indeed incite her pleasure in doing so. The ambiguity of her existence, this time understood as the crisscrossing inflections of class, race, and age difference, enables her to do so. Beauvoir suggests that one's objectification or marginalization can heighten pleasure in one's own opportunities for its repetition, and this was a point Wright had also stressed in *Black Boy*, one of the two of his works Beauvoir does mention (though she does not discuss this particular material). Wright describes the extreme poverty of his childhood upbringing and the anti-Semitic taunts of the other black children he played with: "we made [Jews] fair game for ridicule"⁴⁹:

when the baldheaded proprietor would pass by, we black children, poor, half-starved, ignorant, victims of racial prejudice, would sing with a proud lilt:

*A rotten egg
Never fries
A cheating dog
Never thrives.*⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 248; *La Vieillesse*, 235 (trans. mod). Beauvoir's claim is that their subjection to adults makes children the more prone to objectify others where possible, another instance of the important intersections of concurrent modes of othering: sex, race, sexuality, age, class, and so on. And recall that in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir suggests at one point that southern American women's support for slavery was a compensation for their inactivity (*The Second Sex*, US601; UK612; FrII426–7).

⁴⁸ On this, see Spelman, *Inessential Woman*, 62. Spelman uses this point to reiterate the anomaly that although Beauvoir is highly attuned to differentials on this matter, and "according to Beauvoir, sexism and classism are deeply intertwined . . . we can't describe the sexism women are subject to without specifying their class"; nonetheless, "Beauvoir does not heed her own insights here," 63.

⁴⁹ Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), 60.

⁵⁰ Wright, *Black Boy*, 61–2.

Both writers depict the intersections between an individual's marginalization and his or her objectification of others. Sex, class, economic, educational, or race subordination all mutually inflect each other, just one example being the way they can heighten their mutual charge and attraction.

In *The Second Sex* and elsewhere, Beauvoir had suggested that to the extent that mothers had few choices and experienced thwarted lives, they were more likely to be authoritarian toward their children, producing particularly hostile relations between mothers and daughters.⁵¹ She had discussed many factors relating to sex subordination, which, she argued, could act to impede solidarity between women. Yet she tended to suggest that class trumped sex, with sex solidarity typically giving way to class solidarity. The additional point is that sex subordination gives meaning to class subordination, and also intensification and gratification; that these fields of exclusions and inclusions reconfigure each other, producing mutually inflected losses and returns. Although this point may seem to compound and build on the earlier insights, it also modifies them. The argument that class trumps sex does not break down the integrity of either category. With Beauvoir attributing an even stronger importance to economic factors in *La Vieillesse*, its position may all the more strongly appear to be that "class trumps age." But Beauvoir's position is more nuanced. As I will argue, the suggestion of different subordinations inciting and impacting on each other contributes to an overall tendency in *La Vieillesse* to undermine the more "block-like" treatment of the categories of sex, class, and race in *The Second Sex*.

We can use this material to reformulate some of Beauvoir's formulations of ambiguity. In some ways, the attention she gives to the intersections of race, class, generational difference, and so on, widens the possibilities for her view of human existents as exchanging the position of objectifier and objectified, subject and object. This is an elaborate potential reversibility, combined with the multiplicity of embodied styles, habits, experiences, and perspectives. For example, we can imagine a woman simultaneously subordinate as female and black, privileged as wealthy and educated, and, in addition to the simultaneity of these perspectives which ambiguously inhabit her, also in a position to reverse very rapidly between subjective possibilities, depending on context and the others with whom she engages. As ambiguous, a subject may be at once many conflicting perspectives. In a further formulation of ambiguity, one may be an imminent transformation

⁵¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US513–4, 523; UK528–9, 538–9; FrII327, 339.

into conflicting states of being. Little protects the financially independent woman Beauvoir considers in the concluding pages of *The Second Sex* from exposure to sexual harassment and violence; from sexually laden doubts about her competence, rationality, or character; or from subordination by family or partners. Moreover, one can further nuance ambiguity by considering the inflections to all of these states of existence by temporal considerations relating to memory, habit, anticipation, and embodied transformation.

DISUNIFIED BODIES

Beauvoir's discussions of aging offer an additional means by which an integrity of subject and identity can be questioned.⁵² For one thing, a subject's lack of fixed integrity can be considered in terms of one's physical embodiment. Beauvoir took aged subjects to offer one example of the interconnections of temporal, physical, and subjective asynchrony. Parts of one's body, such as one's heart, might age differently than other parts. Beauvoir describes her aging friend suffering from arthritis: "Moving her hand from her forehead to her waist she said, 'From here to here, I'm twenty-five.' Her hand left her waist and pointed to her feet. 'But from here to there, I'm a hundred.'"⁵³

⁵² Murphy offers an important reminder of a further dislocation that devastated Beauvoir in the periods between her writing *The Second Sex* and *La Vieillesse*: French colonialism and the Algerian War. Murphy cites considerable material from Beauvoir's autobiographies and other writing that speaks to Beauvoir's anguished reconsideration of French national identity in this context. To be French was to embody the identity of occupier, violator, rapist, torturer, and murderer. Following the torture and rape of Algerian Djamilia Boupacha, Murphy suggests that Beauvoir's taking up the case in collaboration with Boupacha's lawyer Gisèle Halimi also led her to challenge her philosophy of freedom, or at least increased her stress on human interconnectedness, 264–5. Though she does not develop the suggestion extensively along these lines, Murphy is also interested in the increasing interplay of thresholds constituting and deconstituting identity, once one is willing to consider their interconnection: "one can find a deconstruction of identities within Beauvoir's writings from this period, afforded by her gender, class and race analyses. The sense of freedom that emerges after such interpretations offers a view of freedom more problematic and better able to address the complexities of postmodernism," 265. However, as Murphy notes, Beauvoir did not go on to write a work (apart from her essays published with Halimi on Boupacha's case) on colonialist politics. To the contrary (Murphy ends the story before 1970), Beauvoir would be led, not to politically disunified bodies, but to the temporally disunified bodies described in her work on the alterity of old age. See "Beauvoir and the Algerian War: Toward a Postcolonial Ethics," 263–97; and Beauvoir and Halimi, *Djamilia Boupacha: The Story of the Torture of a Young Algerian Girl which Shocked Liberal French Opinion*, trans. Peter Green (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

⁵³ Beauvoir, *All Said And Done*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (New York: Warner Books, 1975), 54. The other is the intruder around whom life depends but which disturbs and jeopardizes. The cohering image of self-bodily unity is an import from the other and also divides and fragments us. We similarly acquire language from more complex adults, putting us permanently out of synchrony

Her friend's body is disunified, in this instance, partly because of what Beauvoir is not unwilling to consider are physical realities: ill health and deterioration affects different parts of one's body at different rates and in different ways. There is also a subjective aspect to the living body that is critical here. A body acquires habits and with them a nonreflective sense of its capacities, and the space and time its actions occupy. A body may be disunified between its expectations to climb mountains and engage in vigorous outdoor activities as it always has done, and thwarted by puzzling new limitations of heart rate, muscles, lungs, or limbs, to which it accommodates itself more slowly. Thus, corporeal memory, like "mental" memory, may disunite a body.

Beauvoir also explores the reverse phenomenon: the possibility of a body that anticipates the future and its transformations. Although some aging bodies are split between what they find they can do and their expectations of doing more, Beauvoir notes that others are split between present-day realities and their future expectations of doing less. This may be, for example, the physical and subjective reality of extreme ill health, or of expecting a finite and decreasing future.

Beauvoir also uses the phenomenon of psychic and corporeal anticipation to consider the child's existence as (differently) asynchronous. Many children (though not all – Beauvoir forgot to mention those "not supposed to make it past twenty-five"), expect not death but life. The impending physical and subjective transformations brought by adolescence may not be perceived as impending degradation but as impending change and difference, sometimes comprehensible, sometimes less so.

Thus – and this interest is also seen in *The Second Sex* – Beauvoir focuses on childhood to emphasize a corporeal, and anticipatory, temporal asynchrony arising from the fact that so much of a child's organization and spatiality, its language and even its very "time" ("world," "time," and "space"), is received from the other. She writes in *All Said and Done*: "A child is an alienated being [*un être aliéné*]. It receives the world, the time and the space within which it situates itself from adults, and even from the language it uses. Since things belong to demi-gods and bear their mark, for the child they are not only tools but also the sign of hidden realities with mysterious depths."⁵⁴

with ourselves. We are the composite of anticipated and retrospective comprehensions from and about the other, expectations and reconfigurations that place our subjective and corporeal time in disharmony.

⁵⁴ Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, 13, trans. mod.

Beauvoir's reference to "hidden realities with mysterious depths" expresses the child's perception that he or she is surrounded by forces more complex than can immediately be deciphered, that vital material has been not fully disclosed, or that realities are still to come; the mysteries veil a possible later encounter with what the child grasps he or she does not understand. The reference is a particularly insightful aspect of her reflection on this kind of ambiguity, one that again was also addressed by Wright. Both thematized, more or less directly, the interconnection between that kind of constitutive childish ambiguity, and discontinuous, sedimenting yet fragmenting experiences of sex and race subordination. Both noted that these experiences can have a unique temporality. In its dislocating effects, the phenomenon they described included an ambiguity between, on the one hand, experiences of dramatic shock as subjects experience and register race and sex subordination, and on the other hand, accumulating experiences whose meaning the child registers as significant and also "to come."

THE TEMPORAL DISLOCATIONS OF SHOCK

Beauvoir famously highlights in *The Second Sex* the intersection of dislocating sex objectification with the experience of dislocating temporal becoming: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. . . . Only the intervention of the other [*l'autrui*] can constitute an individual as an *Other* [*un Autre*]. Insofar as he exists in and for himself, the child would hardly be able to think of himself as sexually differentiated."⁵⁵

In fact, though Beauvoir did not make the observation herself, this placed her in communication with interlocutors she had seemingly overlooked, who could be added to those writers on race to whose work she had sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, referred. Consider how both Du Bois and Beauvoir depict a child's aging as seeming to embody the acquisition of a refigured self-consciousness, involving devastating crises in which one is taken out of one's skin, in an experience Beauvoir describes as lacerating. Here, the intruder is a look inflected by sex difference:

All of a sudden the child becomes modest, she will not expose herself naked . . . she inspects herself with mingled astonishment and horror. . . . Something is taking place . . . a struggle, a laceration. . . . Under her sweater or blouse her breasts make their display, and this body which the girl has identified with herself now appears to her as flesh; it is an object that others see and pay attention to. . . . Still another

⁵⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US267; UK295, trans. mod; FrII13.

woman told me this: 'At thirteen I was taking a walk, wearing a short dress and with my legs bare. A man, chuckling, made some comment on my large calves. Next day my mother had me wear stockings and lengthen my skirts, but I shall never forget the sudden shock I felt at being seen *naked*.⁵⁶

This narrative explores a complex understanding of the temporality of alterity. This temporality is seemingly sudden, a moment of punctual, instantaneous shock. A narrator seems to depict a sudden moment of being jolted from one state of being to another, in the above case, jolted into the state of being a sexually risible and exposed youthful subordinate. The race theorists who directly or indirectly influenced Beauvoir described moments of seeming temporal punctuality, of apparent "sudden shock," and instantaneous transformation and becoming.

Thus Du Bois attaches a significant temporality to the consciousness of location in a racist context. Discussing boys and girls socializing, and engaged in the pastime of exchanging name cards, Du Bois describes an encounter in which his card is refused by a white girl. She is, in other contexts, a likely candidate for sex subordination, but in this narrative engages in the race subordination of Du Bois who depicts a dividing border as suddenly arising: "The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card, — refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart, life and longing but shut out from their world by a vast veil.⁵⁷

In Wright's narrative, though the lessons of race are slowly accumulated, he depicts an apparent time before consciousness of race and racism. But this time is only apparently naïve and the child only apparently oblivious of race. He or she knows that something, even if nameless, is wrong, constituting a comprehension to come:

It was in this manner that I first stumbled upon the relations between whites and blacks, and what I learned frightened me. Though I had long known that there were people called 'white' people, it had never meant anything to me emotionally. I had seen white men and women upon the streets a thousand times, but they had never looked particularly 'white.' To me they were merely people like other people, yet somehow strangely different because I had never come in close touch with any of them. . . .

'The "white" man . . . *beat* the "black" boy.'

⁵⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US308; UK333, trans. mod; FrII57–8.

⁵⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Boston and New York: Bedford, 1997), 38.

'But why?'

'You're too young to understand.'⁵⁸ . . .

I did not object to being called colored, but I knew that there was something my mother was holding back. She was not concealing facts, but feelings, attitudes, convictions which she did not want me to know. . . . I did not know enough to be afraid in a concrete manner.⁵⁹

Wright depicts the feeling of foreboding anticipation, of meaning to come, which is the complement to the possibility of Du Bois's "sudden shock." The kind of sudden shock depicted by Du Bois is anticipated by this only half-knowing foreboding, and gives the force to the suddenness of realization.

In a time apparently long prior to puberty, Beauvoir depicts the girl in terms of "her spontaneous surge [*élan*] towards life, her enjoyment of playing, laughing, adventure."⁶⁰ With respect to many depictions of racism and sexism, a cataclysmic experience is depicted of encounter, realization, acquisition of a new consciousness, loss of a world. In relation to these encounters, an infantile "time prior to the discovery of racism" or "before sex subordination" is often projected. Beauvoir, who equivocally projects this original time, appears to give it credence in the following passage:

In girls as in boys the body is first of all the radiation [*rayonnement*] of a subjectivity, the instrument that accomplishes the comprehension of the world: it is through the eyes, the hands, that children apprehend the universe, and not through the sexual parts. The dramas of birth and weaning unfold after the same fashion for nurslings of both sexes, these have the same interests and the same pleasures.⁶¹

Beauvoir projects the "prior" of the neonate who has not yet acquired self-consciousness that it lives in a world in which it will be sexed and raced, and who (in this retrospective time) lives from the perspective of an outward-turned body, rather than from the perspective of a body curled inward by scrutiny from the world. But the infantile time before sexism or racism is also the retroactive phantasy of the subject who at a certain point "discovers" race or sex differentiation. This time is, as Beauvoir also stresses, from the outset being shaped by and shaping itself in that habitus. Phantasmic as the time before race and sex may be, it is no less resonant for the subject who experiences transformation into nonreciprocal sexed

⁵⁸ Wright, *Black Boy*, 23–4. Though Wright depicts a time prior to a thorough consciousness of race, this is a period in which he plays with a crowd of black children, is disciplined by a white policeman, and describes himself as watching white people (for whom his black mother is working as a cook) eat during a time of hunger when his father has abandoned his family, 19.

⁵⁹ Wright, *Black Boy*, 49. ⁶⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US294; UK321; FrII43.

⁶¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US267; UK295, trans. mod; FrII13.

and/or raced beings-for-others as shock. The shocking transition from this state may well be a critical experience but can in some respects be considered illusory because, as Beauvoir also highlights: "If . . . she seems to us to be already sexually determined [*spécifiée*] . . . it is because the intervention of the other [*autrui*] in the life of the child is a factor almost from the start [*est presque originelle*]." ⁶²

Beauvoir thus installs an ambiguity of time with respect to the acquisition of the subjective life of subordination, an ambiguity divided between the time of foreboding, uncertain anticipation, the times of punctual shock and reconfiguration, and the retrospectively projected time that is critical to many experiences of subordination – most eloquently expressed in Du Bois's time of the "veil," and the discovery of the "line." This is a further way of thinking about ambiguity, in addition to the ambiguity between "originality" and the "subsequent" transition, "discovery" and the projected "prior."

THE DIVIDED TIMES OF SUBORDINATION

Considering the interconnections of lived time and subordination, Beauvoir installs intricate differentials relating to age. Though she neglects many of the differentials of race that could have made her discussion more complex, her insight is that age matters differently to the "othered" subject, partly (in her own treatment of the question) because of the impression that one has "become" a woman and acquired one's being-as-others as gendered at (or during) *some time* (times often depicted as cataclysmic encounters with particular individuals who hand one the name or identity that turns one inside out). This name must have been handed the subject in limitless subtle ways since and before birth for the subject to so profoundly accept the name in question. ⁶³ But the phantasy of the time before one's becoming is no less powerful. Perhaps we can understand in these terms Beauvoir's depiction of girls and women as often anguished by the experience of age

⁶² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US268; UK296, trans. mod; FrII4.

⁶³ In *Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), Judith Butler takes up this question of why the subject "turns." She returns to Louis Althusser's discussion of interpellation, which depicts a subject who "comes into being as a result of language," 106. In Althusser's well-known allegorical narrative, a policeman calls out, "Hey you there" and the subject turns, named and naming itself as the object of the social call, and implicitly accepts a certain structure of social relations in so doing (that policeman and others call in such a way that we respond). Butler asks what this subject must already be to "turn." As she writes, "Although there would be no turning around without first having been hailed, neither would there be a turning around without some readiness to turn," 107. Though Beauvoir and Butler's analyses of "readiness to turn" are differently theorized, they deflect the image of a strangely passive and compliant subject, without reinstalling an ego who could choose whether or not to comply.

transformation. As it is lived: “the transitions from one stage to another are dangerously abrupt [*sont d’une dangereuse brutalité*]⁶⁴; they are manifested [*ils se trahissent*]⁶⁵ in crises – puberty, sexual initiation, the menopause, which are much more decisive than in the male.” Perhaps metamorphosis experienced as negative shock appears as more jolting, and so more sudden. Beauvoir concludes, “whereas man grows old gradually, woman is suddenly deprived of her femininity.”⁶⁶

Like Du Bois, Fanon, and Wright, Beauvoir suggests that ideals and dreams of wholeness and stasis are differently affected by the specifics of embodiment and its intersection with socially inflected alterity, and she asks how these exchanges are inflected by the consciousness of some groups that are socially marginalized, by the intensification of modalities of being-for-others, and by the intersections of race, gender, class, and age relations.⁶⁷

Thus, a becoming is not just an accumulated sedimentation of consistent meanings, but is also an accumulated fracturing by plural identifications with different fields of identity, identification, and subordination, themselves involving plural and fractured temporalities. The sudden recognition of being-for-others is depicted as taking a bitter hold in writings about socially sustained objectification because the apparent suddenness makes sense of longstanding patterns, and its horror is imbued with retroactive meaning. Suddenness is most shocking *as* sudden when it is not sudden, when it catches a sequence of exchanges and meanings, rearranging them in light of the event. A sedimented world takes on a ghastly reconfiguration,

⁶⁴ Beauvoir, US575; UK587; FrII399. ⁶⁵ Beauvoir, US575; UK587; FrII399.

⁶⁶ Beauvoir, US575; UK587; FrII399. However, in an instance of Beauvoir’s own work implicitly entering into dialogue with itself, consider her claim in *La Vieillesse* that, in aging, men may have, at least in some respects, a more sudden experience of losing what has distinguished them from women: it may be that they find themselves “suddenly flung from the active into the inactive category [brutalement précipité de la catégorie des individus actifs dans celle des inactives]” (*Old Age*, 294; *La Vieillesse*, 279). For, she suggests, “retirement brings a radical break into a man’s life, he is entirely cut off from his past and he has to adapt himself to a new status [*dans la vie de l’homme la retraite introduit une radicale discontinuité: il y a rupture avec le passé, il doit s’adapter à un statut nouveau*]” (*Old Age*, 295; *La Vieillesse*, 280).

⁶⁷ Compare to the radical transformation of subjectivity discussed in *Being and Nothingness*: the sometimes dramatic transformation of a being-for-itself into a being-for-others. Sartre depicts himself as a voyeur spying without self-consciousness through a keyhole. Hearing footsteps in the hall, the seer is immediately transformed into consciousness of being seen. Before he was engrossed in looking; now he is conscious of being “a peep.” In Sartre’s work, a being-for-itself is always at the brink of transformation into an inward-looking being-for-others while a being-for-others is in turn always at the brink of looking outward at the world in the next moment: transforming back into the mode of judging rather than being judged, or of perceiving rather than consciousness of being perceived (*Being and Nothingness*, 260). Beauvoir is attentive to differences between such intensifications.

which is very different from those rapid exchanges of the early Sartre's world that can never stick to a subject.⁶⁸ Instead Beauvoir describes a developing individual whose fractured temporality and embodiment critically intersects with his or her experiences both of youth and old age⁶⁹:

My ego is a transcendent object that does not dwell in my consciousness and that can only be viewed from a distance. This viewing is effected by means of an image: we try to picture what we are [*de nous représenter*] through the vision that others have of us. The image itself is not provided in [*donné dans*] consciousness. It is a cluster of intentionalities directed through an analagon towards a missing object. It is generic, contradictory and vague. Yet there are times when it suffices to assure us of our identity . . . at the threshold of adolescence the image falls to pieces: the blunders and the clumsiness of the awkward age arises from the fact that one cannot tell what to replace it with straight away. A similar hesitation and uncertainty appears at the threshold of old age. In both cases the psychiatrists speak of an 'identification crisis.' But there are great differences. The adolescent realizes that he is going through a period of transition: his body transforms and torments him. The aged person comes to feel that s/he is old by means of others, and without having experienced important changes;⁷⁰ within [*intérieurement*] one does not accept the label that has been struck to one – one no longer knows what one is. In *La mise à mort* Aragon symbolizes this want of knowledge and the distress, the confusion that it begets: the hero no longer sees his reflection in the glass – he is no longer capable of seeing himself.⁷¹

Thus Beauvoir defines a subject as sedimented in terms of perceptual, corporeal, and subjective patterns as he or she responds to social forces, without attributing consistency, stability, and rigidity to such a subject. These elements in her work become most salient if one foregrounds the attention she gives to the multiple means by which men and women are

⁶⁸ According to the early Sartre, though we reverse between being a being-for-itself and a being-for-others, and these transitions are certainly depicted as intermittently grotesque, they never take a thorough hold of a subject. He notoriously stresses that the victim of racism or torture always has the capacity to return the look. Because a possible sedimentation of such exchanges is not, in his early work, thematized, objectification is not the "sudden" shocking recognition of a reiterated social pattern one has also always known and to which one has implicitly resonated.

⁶⁹ True, Beauvoir envisages subjects who build up meaningful worlds imbued with the lessons of power, inequality, and ideology. Yet the lessons of race, gender, class, and age distinction are fracturing as much as consolidating. Beauvoir resists both the vision of a consolidated identity, and for that matter a founding or stable ego, in, for example, passages where we see her appealing to a dialogue with Husserl in which Sartre was also engaged. See Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 324–5; *La Vieillesse* 309–10; and Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Noonday Press, 1957). See also Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 444.

⁷⁰ Beauvoir means that there is no one dramatic physical change that is the equivalent of puberty. She adds in a footnote, "Women do have the physical experience of the menopause; but it takes place well before old age" (Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 325).

⁷¹ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 324–5, trans. mod; *La Vieillesse*, 309–10.

othered.⁷² The accumulated details on these means serve to emphasize – though it is rarely the conclusion overtly drawn by the author – that there is no gender without class or age, no age without gender and class. Of course, these results imply the immediate necessity – and potential – for adding the critical point that there is similarly no race abstractable from class, sex, and age differentials.

Thus we come to better understand her conversions of alterity, including the weaknesses and oversights, and the resources and strengths. Once one thinks of a subject in terms of the multiple fields in which it is dislocated by alterity, its apparent consolidation as gendered, raced, or classed is dislodged. This phenomenon is one of the elements that forms part of the mobility in Beauvoir's own work, in which certain positions she puts forward are engaged, answered, or undermined by others.⁷³ Beauvoir reworked the model of moving backward and forward from one state to another as "subject" and "object." We may be "subject" as a distinguished aged man, and "object" as an aged man. We may be "valued" as man, and "devalued" as old. We may be simultaneously valued and devalued as "old." We may be imbued with a sense of being female *and* white, male *and* black. Moreover, habit, repetition, interaction, and anticipation suggested to Beauvoir that in addition to occupying multiple modes as subject or object (states she understood as capable of simultaneity), each of these modes could co-exist or conflict with an alternative status relating to sex, age, class, and education. They could coexist or conflict with a sense of anticipated potential to take up new modes *as* differently aged, sexed, classed, and educated, in which one is also more or less aware of the likelihoods of being impoverished, poorer, or sicker. Moreover, past memories and habits relating to many of these possibilities inhabit and fragment any state that can be identified as actual. A young girl may be aware not only of being sexed female at the same time as she is raced white, but she may be concurrently aware of an anticipated capacity to humiliate someone as working class and old at the same time that she anticipates her own further or future sexual objectification; and she also bears the corporeal styles and memories, both conflicting and harmonious, of her past experiences.

⁷² If we return to the early Sartre for the comparison, he depicts an outwardly directed subjectivity temporarily interrupted by the world looking back at it. Beauvoir emphasizes group-based objectification and marginalization, and as a result, it is a less arbitrary matter who becomes a being-for-others. This occurs at the risk of inflexibility being attributed to group and individual patterns.

⁷³ Indeed, Beauvoir's body of work, taken with the resonant image of a body out of synchrony with itself, could be described as also out of synchrony with itself.

In recognizing many of these complications, Beauvoir amplifies the concept of socially inflected anticipation and reconfiguring. Her depiction of being gendered involves an implicit, retrospective recognition when the adolescent girl joins the dots of having been unreciprocally other in the eyes of male viewers. Gender requires a sedimentation that is not so much cumulative as split between the times of haunted anticipation and retrospectivity. One of the many things that being gendered feminine evidently means for Beauvoir is this anticipation that haunts embodied subjectivity of *imminent* transformation into being a girl or woman in the eyes of others. Of course, men are also transformed into beings-for-others, and are sometimes transformed into beings-for-others in the eyes of women. The difference lies in a disproportionate relationship to a haunting anticipation of that transformation *as sexed* and its capacity to reconfigure accumulated meanings. But once Beauvoir has opened this door, she must admit all the notions of anticipation and haunting that would follow. She importantly stresses that girls are both constricted, and cruel, describing their capacity to vilify the elderly and impoverished, just as one gives attention to equivalent depictions in the work of Du Bois and Wright. This phenomenon is enfolded in Du Bois's depiction of the young white girl who refuses his card, as it is in Fanon's depiction of internalized racism as a form of race aspiration on the part of colonized Antilleans. The "white mask" valuation of metropolitan French whiteness may embody the divisions and cruelties of the colonized.⁷⁴

It goes without saying that a target of objectification may well objectify in turn. But the conceptualization of subjectivity opened up by Beauvoir, once she has acknowledged the sedimented, disturbed anticipation of a subject who begins to recognize pattern and repetitions in (for example) gendered relations, must include other patterns and repetitions the same subject is recognizing and anticipating with regard to race, aging, class, and wealth. This thoroughly haunted subject must be seen as a crisscrossing of disconnected anticipations and retrospections. A subject who knows that it is and will be constrained as feminine but expects to be able to mock

⁷⁴ As Fanon stresses when he recounts the stigmatization of Senegalese by some Antilleans, or the resentment caused when those from Guadeloupe "were trying to 'pass' as Martinicans," see Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Paladin, 1970), 20. Some of the most difficult material by Fanon on this topic concerns an intensely hostile account of Mayotte Capécia's *Je suis Martiniquaise*, considered by Fanon the consummate instance of anti-black femininity. For a less scornful account, see T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, "Anti-Black Femininity and Mixed-Race Identity: Engaging Fanon to Read Capécia," in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, eds. Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Renée T. White (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 155–62.

someone older but poor, is cohabited by both anticipations. Beauvoir most interestingly offers this implicit concept of multiple cohabitating apprehensions and anticipations. This encourages us to think about the possibly complex interrelations between her comments about race and gender in *America Day By Day*; her comments about gender, aging, culture, and class in *The Second Sex*; and her comments about aging, gender, class, and sexuality in *Old Age*.

AGE MATTERS

Having discussed the transformations one undergoes as sexed, classed, and (to a lesser degree) raced, Beauvoir was all the more fascinated with the literal transformation constituted by aging, expanding her capacity to discuss the multiple variations that come to inhabit human existents. Where racism and sex bias may involve the violent displacement of that which is disavowed onto a race or sex vilified other, Beauvoir argued that age bias represents a distinctive mode of depreciation and marginalization. A privileged young adult is unable to secure itself from the certainty that it must literally become its marginalized, depreciated, and dehumanized other (and so Beauvoir understood the lessons of aging for many).

One's generational transitions make unsettling demands that Beauvoir argues we should conceive radically, demands that it is again promising to contemplate in the context of her early "ethics of ambiguity": "Thinking of myself as an old person when I am twenty or forty means thinking of myself as someone else as *another* than myself [*c'est me penser autre*]." ⁷⁵ Though my refusal to identify myself in the old woman I will become may be aggressive, Beauvoir does not counter with the reproof that we are all the same. And although she is intrigued with the prospect that I will become another, it is not because she considers that in some time prior to this transformation I am myself. She depicted interruption and transformation as unpleasantly dislocating. But this is not because she depicts us as otherwise in synchrony with ourselves, or the same as ourselves. Instead, continuity and synchrony with oneself were considered hopeful, highly charged fantasies.

For this reason, although Beauvoir focuses on one's old age as particularly disconcerting, she offers a much broader field of physical transformations understood as shocking. We read of women who experience the transitions of middle and older age as dramatically alienating and disordering. A middle-aged woman looks in the mirror and finds that her face is that

⁷⁵ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 11; *La Vieillesse*, 11.

of somebody else. One day the aging female protagonist of "Age of Discretion" finds her husband transformed into an old man.⁷⁶ But Beauvoir also recalls being a young girl, at a time when contemplating the prospect that she would turn into a grownup was amazing and "deeply distress[ing]."⁷⁷ Her work depicts physical transformation as bearing the potential for being startled out of one's skin. The girl is incredulous at the prospect that she will become an adult, and the adult is no less incredulous to discover herself and those about her older. Sometimes craving it, Beauvoir's characters are nonetheless distressed by corporeal change. We permanently metamorphose, and even when craved, "every metamorphosis has something frightening."⁷⁸ In her depictions of extreme sickness, the subject may be thoroughly transformed: in *She Came to Stay* an experience of pneumonia (which Beauvoir had contracted in 1937 and depicted autobiographically in *The Prime of Life*) is recounted by the narrator, who is uncharacteristically overwhelmed with the relief at relinquishing control, her apathy and loss of energy combined with intermittent intensification and agitation: "Françoise was just anything, and just anything had suddenly become possible [*Françoise était n'importe quoi, et n'importe quoi soudain était devenu possible*]."⁷⁹ The extreme challenge to her breathing, strength, and energy dislocates her self-image as a consistent subjectivity.

The more extensively that Beauvoir depicts humans as interrupted and destabilized by ongoing metamorphoses, the more she undermines the depiction of a "normal" stasis or continuous identity only intermittently interrupted by transformation. She reorients her conceptualization of normal subjectivity and embodiment in terms of its permanent, though

⁷⁶ See the novella, "The Age of Discretion," in which the narrator is forced to come to the same realization about herself. However, one final aspect of the novella depicts the narrator's developing conviction that old age is a real limitation. She first finds that her intellectual work has become pointless and repetitive, and then that she has lost her physical strength: "I who used to climb so energetically in former days . . . was gasping for breath. . . . I was no longer in control of my heart or my breathing. . . . I had said to André, 'I don't see what one loses in growing old'. Well, I could see now, all right. . . . My body was letting me down [*mon corps me lâchait*]. I was no longer capable of writing. . . . What a deception [*duperie*], this intoxicating sense of progress [*progrès*], of upward movement [*ascension*], with which I had been carried away [*dont je m'étais grisée*] for now the moment of collapse was at hand [*puisque vient le moment de la dégringolade!*] ! It had already begun. And now it would be very fast and very slow: we were going to turn into very old people [*nous allions devenir de grands vieillards*]" (Beauvoir, "The Age of Discretion," *The Woman Destroyed*, trans. Patrick O'Brian [London: Harper Collins, 1984], 60), trans. mod; Simone de Beauvoir, *L'âge de discrétion*, in *La Femme rompue*, *L'âge de discrétion*, *Monologue. Récits* [Paris: Gallimard, 1967] 70–72.

⁷⁷ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 11; *La Vieillesse*, 11. ⁷⁸ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 11; *La Vieillesse*, 11.

⁷⁹ Beauvoir, *L'invitée* (Paris: Gallimard [Folio] 1972), 225; Beauvoir, *She Came to Stay*, trans. Yvonne Moyse and Roger Senhouse (New York: W.W. Norton, 1954), 181, trans. mod.

unsettling, transformation, a permanence of transformation that does not improve a subject's capacity to undergo metamorphosis with either ease or a sense of normality.

This situation suggested another model of alterity: not just the exchange of the positions of subject and other, nor yet of the positions of cultural alterity, but a literal, bodily transformation into the other. The closest equivalent would have been obligatory sex change,⁸⁰ for there is, Beauvoir noted, an obligatory generational transformation. Though the kind of transformation to which she gives her attention in these discussions is so literal, Beauvoir asks whether the inevitability of aging could provide a revised ground for conceptualizing responsibility toward the other.

In addition to constantly transforming into beings-for-others, we are haunted by and anticipate such transformations through the sedimentation of social relations and our accumulating and evolving senses of what is honored and what is despised. From this perspective, Beauvoir could differently depict humans as inhabited by alterity and consciousness of alterity. Her argument that old age is "the other" led to a conclusion she had not been able to offer in *The Second Sex* with respect to woman's status as "other." About old age, it could be said both that no matter how much one distances that alterity, one becomes that other, and in addition, one is inhabited by that anticipation. The latter is, moreover, critical to our existence as ambiguous. If the anticipation effectively prompted alternative visions both of ambiguity and alterity, Beauvoir would be led to revisit her vision of reciprocity.

⁸⁰ Complicating this question, also, is Beauvoir's intimation that, among its various multiple facets, aging can be lived as a change in how we are "sexed." She suggests that old age is inconsistent with conventional ideals for masculinity and femininity (*Old Age*, 46; *La Vieillesse*, 46) that menopausal women may be viewed as losing what distinctively makes them women (*The Second Sex* US399; FRII399; *Old Age*, 95; *La Vieillesse*, 93 and that men, in retiring, may lose what had seemed to elevate them over women (*Old Age* 274–5; *La Vieillesse*, 279) .

Conversions of Reciprocity

When two human categories [*catégories humaines*] find themselves in each other's presence [*se trouvent en présence*], each aspires to impose its sovereignty upon the other. If both are able to sustain this claim, a reciprocal relation is created between them. Whether it is in enmity, or in amity, it is always in a state of tension. If one of the two is privileged, has some advantage, this one prevails over the other and undertakes to keep the other in subjection.

Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. mod.

RECIPROCITY AS THE REVERSAL OF ALTERITY

Although in *America Day by Day* Beauvoir does consider the constant consciousness one might have in a racist context of being black ("he can never forget that he is black, and that makes him conscious every minute of the whole white world from which the word 'black' takes its meaning"),¹ her account of race relations in America would nonetheless provide the context for one of her less felicitous conversions. The depiction of a disturbing being-for-others in the context of hostile race relations is hijacked by a reversal of perspective: Beauvoir's sudden consciousness of being white.² Beauvoir describes encounters with the supposedly "unfriendly" faces of African Americans living in "poverty and hatred" (*la misère et la haine*): "we felt the bite [*la morsure*] of those looks . . . in these hostile streets."³ The depiction of American race relations gives way to a focus on the

¹ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, trans. Carol Cosman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 58; Beauvoir, *L'Amérique au jour le jour* (Paris: Gallimard [Folio], 1997), 84 – the passage is discussing Beauvoir's impressions of Richard Wright's experiences.

² On this topic, see Sonia Kruks's "Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Privilege," *Hypatia* 20, no. 1 (2005): 178–205.

³ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 235; *L'Amérique au jour le jour*, 326.

perspectival transformation undergone by the narrator,⁴ and the depiction of race inequity in America risks dissolving into self-preoccupation,⁵ with the reader wondering if Beauvoir considers herself “othered” as race enemy.

With every step, our discomfort grows. As we go by, voices drop, gestures drop, smiles die: all life is suspended in the depths of those angry eyes [*ces yeux qui nous maudissent*]. The silence is so stifling, the menace so oppressive that it's almost a relief when something finally explodes. An old woman glares at us in disgust and spits twice . . . a tiny girl runs off crying, “Enemies! Enemies! [*Les ennemies! Les ennemies!*].”⁶

⁴ One can compare Elizabeth Spelman's wary account of the status of race in Beauvoir's writing with Margaret A. Simons's account of the relationship between Wright and Beauvoir. According to Simons, Wright's influence on Beauvoir was primarily that of an educator, not only with respect to race relations in America, but also as a model of a writer's political engagement integrating a Marxist perspective. This reminder is useful, as is Simons's response to Paul Gilroy's cited suggestion that there needs to be a more integrated and intertextual account of the relations between figures such as Genet, Sartre, Beauvoir, and Wright – there is little communication between the studies of these figures. Yet Simons spares Beauvoir the critical scrutiny Spelman directs at Beauvoir's account of race, although a project on such interconnections could only be enhanced by it. Thus we hear of what Beauvoir learnt from Wright, but not about the equally important question of what she missed. The reading is curious for reminding us, toward its conclusion, that Wright's influence on Beauvoir is not unproblematic given accusations of his misogyny, which have arisen, among many other reasons mentioned by Simons, because of his scathing review of Zora Neale Hurston. This is described as a silencing, one then nuanced by reference to Gilroy and Barbara Johnson's more complex readings of Wright. But what of the complication for Beauvoir's work arising from her own neglect of figures such as Hurston, who must have been an option for her discussion, particularly given the references in Myrdal's *American Dilemma*? See Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race and the Origins of Existentialism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 168, 180–2, 184; also citing Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 186.

⁵ Doris Ruhe interprets similar material in *America Day by Day* differently, stressing the parallel with the dialectical relationship asserted by Sartre in his consideration of anti-semitism: “Ce n'est pas, à son avis, le comportement des noirs qui fait peur aux blancs, c'est bien plus l'envers de leur propre haine qu'ils voient dans les visages des habitants de Harlem et qui leur fait peur.” Ruhe goes on to discuss Beauvoir's citation from Myrdal, Sartre's attribution of the passage to Richard Wright in his discussion of anti-Semitism and Beauvoir's reiteration of the parallels between racism, anti-Semitism, and the othering of women particularly in her interest in the idea that racism and anti-Semitism are the “problème des blancs” (Doris Ruhe, *Contextualiser Le deuxième sexe* [Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2006], 85–6). In the light of this material, Beauvoir's stress on her own reactions takes on a different perspective, and might be considered an exploration of “her problem.” Though she does not say so, the “hostility” she describes in the faces of others would presumably, by her argument, be the reflection of her own race hostility. Further, it should be noted that, more generally, the self-preoccupation is intended as part of the overall project. Recall her letter, in her awkward English, to Nelson Algren (June 7, 1947): “I shall speak of America, but about myself, too; I should like to describe the whole experience of myself-in-America altogether; what means [sic] arrival and departure and passing by, and the attempt to look at things, to get something of them and so on. And at the same time I'll try to get the things themselves” (Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair: Letters to Nelson Algren* (New York: New Press, 1998), 26.

⁶ Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, 236; *L'Amérique au jour le jour*, 326–7. This narrative is counterbalanced with Beauvoir's account of white hatred, as with her description of a white woman violently angry at the idea that a black woman might pass ahead of her in a queue, and bus travellers jeering at

In the light of *The Second Sex*'s preface there is even reason to think Beauvoir may have temporarily considered this reversal of perspective, through which the privileged, observing spectator is the object of real or imagined hostility, an ethically important experience. Making the transition from *America Day by Day* to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir opened the latter with an apposite exchange of perspective between those who might consider each other to belong to culturally or racially different groups. Revisiting the struggle between subjects as she opens *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir begins her discussion with group relations relating to culture, race, and sex. In addition to Hegel, Beauvoir had just read Lévi-Strauss's *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, and her thoughts on the self-other struggle also had newly anthropological inflections. These grounded one of the earlier overt concepts of reciprocity locatable in her work. "It is original," she claims, "for an individual *and a group* [*collectivité*] to oppose itself to the 'other' [my emphasis; *poser l'Autre en face de soi*]." ⁷ Elaborating on the idea, she runs together in the same paragraph her reference to travelers chancing to share a train compartment ("that is enough to make vaguely hostile 'others' out of all the rest of the passengers on the train") ⁸ and the practice (that she deems equally common) of considering suspect those of another race or community:

In small-town eyes [*pour le villageois*] all persons not belonging to the village are suspect "others" [*des «autres» suspects*]; to the native of a country all who inhabit other countries are "foreigners" [*des «étrangers»*]; Jews are "others" [*des «autres»*] for the anti-Semite, as are blacks for American racists, indigenous peoples for colonists, proletarians for the privileged class [*les classes possédantes*]. ⁹

Acknowledging that humans constantly experience each other as threat, suspect, or alien, Beauvoir uses examples that blur the phenomenon with

a pregnant black woman who faints (*America*, 233; *L'Amérique*, 322–3) – Beauvoir does not lack for reasons to interpret these as enemy relations. Gail Weiss has been somewhat kinder – or attentive – to this passage. She agrees that Beauvoir takes the intensity of her own visceral reaction to be of importance, seeing it as an expression of intercorporeality: "Beauvoir inhales and exhales the smell of hatred, her body registering the difference between the 'arrogant hatred of whites, the silent hatred of blacks.' Through this process, and through the unearned privilege she receives as a white woman, she comes to feel complicit with the racism that is all around her. Unable to maintain the isolated stance of 'foreigner,' Beauvoir assumes the failure of American democracy as her own failure to overcome the physical, social, and institutional boundaries that separate the black oppressed from their white oppressors" (Weiss, "Challenging Choices: An Ethics of Oppression," *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir. Critical Essays*, ed. Simons (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 241–61, 256.

⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US xxiii; UK17; FrI16.

⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, USxxiii; UK17; FrI16.

⁹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, USxxiii; UK16, trans. mod; FrI16.

that of cultural othering, even with the prejudices of racism. Though it is not the case made overall by *The Second Sex*, she seems to be on the brink of claiming not just that “othering” is inevitable, but that race othering is almost inevitable, an impression not lessened by the subsequent elaboration. These associations inflect her renewed turn to ethics, and to the ideal of reciprocity.

Having described the common experience that belonging to a group leads its members to consider those not included “the other,” she adds that none of us are exempt from the subsequent discovery that we may be similarly considered by other “individuals and groups” who are thereby “forced to realize the reciprocity [*la réciprocité*] of their relations.”¹⁰ While the term “reciprocity” will take on several meanings in her work, here Beauvoir means that my perception of the other as (racially, or via some collectivity or identity) marginal or not the norm should ideally be equalized and thus inflected by my sense that I, too, must sometimes take up a position as potentially suspect and conspicuous: “But the other consciousness sets up a reciprocal claim [*lui oppose une prétention réciproque*]. The native traveling abroad is shocked to discover one is in turn regarded as a “stranger” [*étranger*] by the natives of neighboring countries.”¹¹

Compare this scenario to the politics implied in Beauvoir’s earlier, Hegelian-inspired vision providing the epigram to *L’Invitée* (*She Came to Stay*) of “each consciousness seeking the death of the other.”¹² Beauvoir seems not entirely, at this later point, to reject the view that any group is likely to collectively consider another group a hostile and foreign force. But she builds into that view additional suggestions, for example, that an exchange of perspective is necessary and should be inevitable (I consider a particular group the other, but then discover I am for another group similarly suspect).¹³ Moreover, she values, as Sartre had not in *Being and*

¹⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, USxxiii; UK17, trans. mod; FrI7.

¹¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, USxxiii; UK17, trans. mod; FrI7.

¹² Beauvoir, *She Came to Stay*, trans. Yvonne Moyse and Roger Senhouse (New York: Norton, 1954), 7. A variation on the idea remains present in *The Second Sex*, at least insofar as Beauvoir claims that subjects confront each other in the mode of each aspiring to impose their sovereignty (*souveraineté*) on the other. Here, however, she suggests that this aim need not result in the inevitable subjection of one of the parties. In a situation where there is not excessive advantage or privilege, the relationship may result in a kind of reciprocity – albeit one of perpetual tension, friendly or hostile – in which neither party would unduly triumph over the other. (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US61; UK93; FrI107).

¹³ On the other hand, Bauer points out that in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* Beauvoir considers problematic objectification per se. In this case, it is identified as a form of bad faith, since it must be addressed at an other, and the very address constitutes an acknowledgement of the other’s freedom that the objectification denies. Either objectification is problematic, or its nonreciprocity is problematic:

Nothingness, this comprehension of reversibility, particularly by an individual who otherwise supposes she or he is the norm or the center. The problem, as she presents the 1949 work, is that forces conspire to block the interchangeability of this experience.¹⁴ It is all too possible for many groups to disavow reciprocity, or not thoroughly experience it. Thus, introducing her work on women's situation, Beauvoir notes that because of the sedimentation of historical forces, men and women have not come to equally exchange such perspectives – women have unreciprocally been “other” in the eyes of men.

Later, Beauvoir would accuse herself of an early Manichaeism in *The Second Sex*, becoming more circumspect about the vision of reversibly antagonistic individuals and collectivities¹⁵ engaging in polarizing struggles. Moreover, that vision abstracts the struggles from their context, yet these entities are the product of their encounters with others. Sex cannot be abstracted from class, age, race, or economic background, and “men” and “women” arise from their mutual differentiations and relations. They are the product, not the origin of their history and interrelations. Given her demonstration of how men and women arise as historical formations, Beauvoir would hardly disagree, yet she does not always find the means to emphasize the point.

RECIPROCITIES

This initial view of “reciprocity” in *The Second Sex*'s preface is, however, not the only concept of reciprocity at work in the book. Beauvoir also defines reciprocity in terms of mutual need or dependency¹⁶; legal and economic equality, particularly the kind that allows one to enter into a contractual

both these ideas circulate in Beauvoir's work. See Beauvoir, “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” trans. Marybeth Timmermann, in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 90–149, 133; and see Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophy and Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 155.

¹⁴ One question for commentators concerns the extent to which, as Amy Hollywood has argued, there is an “uneasy” movement on Beauvoir's part between the view of othering as “essentially hierarchizing” (on this view, to be other *is* to be “reduced to object-like status”) or whether othering could be reconfigured “in less inherently oppressive ways through the mutual recognition of free conscious beings.” Further, how should we understand the relationship between these concepts of alterity? See Hollywood, “‘Mysticism is Tempting’: Simone de Beauvoir on Mysticism, Metaphysics, and Sexual Difference,” in *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 120–45, 122.

¹⁵ Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1964), 192.

¹⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, USxxxvi; UK20; Fr119.

relationship on a fair footing¹⁷; mutual obligation¹⁸; exchanging the role of “other”¹⁹; exchanging the role as other in the more specific sense of that which is foreign, importantly different, and elusive to one’s grasp²⁰; subjects serving as both subject and object for each other, occupying positions as simultaneously subject and object²¹; the idea of a constant tension produced by the mutual attempt to subordinate, without this necessarily producing the entrenched subordination of any individual or group, a tension that can be seen in both friend and enemy relations²²; and the mutuality of generosity and friendship between subjects, which can be seen as a supreme human accomplishment.²³ Related ideas can be located in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, which depicts each subject as contributing to the other’s situation and so to the conditions or context of their freedom.²⁴ The work also depicts subjects mutually appealing or responding to each other. Communication involves implicit or explicit modes of recognition.²⁵ *The Ethics of Ambiguity* defines a mutual inseparability according to which “the me-others relationship [*le moi-autrui rapport*] is as inseparable as the subject-object relationship [*le rapport sujet-objet*].”²⁶ This work particularly stresses a concept of freedom as only achievable through the freedom of

¹⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US426–7; UK446; FrII96.

¹⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US425; UK445; FrII96.

¹⁹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, USxxiii, 141; UK17, 173; FrII6–17, 233.

²⁰ On this see Michele Le Doeuff’s generous response to some of Beauvoir’s depictions of other cultures – “human realities in which she is not involved.” On Le Doeuff’s interpretation, reciprocity is not just a matter of exchanging the position of other (objectification and being objectified). One must also recognize the difficulty of understanding and being understood. When I suppose too easily that I understand the other well, that I have fully grasped him or her (as peep, vain, and so on), I may have objectified the other. Le Doeuff sees in Beauvoir’s notion of reciprocity a positive recognition that the other is difficult to understand and necessarily exceeds my capacities of comprehension (Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia’s Choice*, trans. Trista Selous [Oxford: Blackwell, 1991], 73–5, 97.

²¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US140, 401–2; UK172, 422; FrI232, II167.

²² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US61; UK93; FrII07.

²³ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US140; UK172; FrI232.

²⁴ Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, 137; and for an emphasis on this idea in Beauvoir’s work, see Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 148.

²⁵ Again, see Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 149, and the discussion on the use of the term “*appel*” in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, 133, 137. See also *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, where Beauvoir describes a freedom that occupies itself in denying another’s freedom as “outrageous” (*scandaleuse*) because this very project of denying freedom involves an acknowledgement of freedom, 97. In the same work, she describes the smiles of children as “appeal and promise [*appel et promesse*],” 102, and argues that all human subjects are enmeshed with each other because of our engagement in a “human world in which each object is penetrated with human meanings. It is a speaking world from which solicitations and appeals rise up,” 74. See also the related discussion of communication in the context of the argument that freedom requires other freedoms, 71 (Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman [New York: Citadel, 1976]).

²⁶ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 72.

others, and theorizes also the “universal” solidarity of the “totality of men” in the context of which finite undertakings occur.²⁷ When new possibilities open up for a subject (she gives the example of a liberated slave), they are said to simultaneously open up for all subjects.²⁸ There is also a depiction of interdependence in terms of subjects’ mutual need to be confirmed by the other as a freedom, with each acting to open up futures for the other in this particular sense, futures on which the other’s freedom depends:

Each one depends on others. . . . It is this interdependence which explains why oppression is possible and why it is hateful. As we have seen, my freedom, in order to fulfill itself, requires that it emerge into an open future [*déboucher sur un avenir ouvert*]: it is others who open the future to me, it is they who, setting up the world of tomorrow, define my future; but if, instead of allowing me to participate in this constructive movement, they oblige me to consume my transcendence in vain, if they keep me below the level which they have conquered and on the basis of which new conquests will be achieved, then they are cutting me from the future, they are changing me into a thing.²⁹

Beauvoir acknowledges the impossibility of all freedoms successfully recognizing all other freedoms simultaneously. At this point in the discussion, it is an impossible ideal, but an ideal she nonetheless affirms. We must, she argues, “accept the tension of the struggle . . . without aiming at an impossible state of equilibrium and rest.”³⁰ *The Ethics of Ambiguity* also contains a discussion of derivations from Hegel: adding to the idea that every consciousness simultaneously seeks the death of the other,³¹ a possibility described by Beauvoir as “the essential moment of Hegelian ethics . . . the moment when consciousnesses recognize one another; in this operation the other is recognized as identical with me.”³²

²⁷ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 156, 78, 144, 71. For this reason Beauvoir argues that we must reject oppression on behalf of ourselves *and* with a view to the interests of others. The work also stresses the significance of our response to the appeal of the other, but does not do so in terms of exchange. Here, another has some claim on me “and I find myself charged with his upbringing, his happiness and his health,” 137. Also of interest is a passage in that same work in which Beauvoir points out that “the Other is multiple,” 144, which complicates our obligation to the other’s solicitation of me. What of conflicting, diverse appeals? Arguing that others make multiple appeals, Beauvoir curtails her discussion, not reflecting on how the other’s appeal may, in many ways, be conflicted, or otherwise fragmented or divided. An idea that she could have more thoroughly investigated is that there are multiple others, multiplicity is attributable to the other – indeed, “an” other is a plurality of intersecting, unstable forces.

²⁸ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 86–7. ²⁹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 82, trans. mod.

³⁰ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 96.

³¹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 70, and see footnote 12, earlier.

³² Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 104.

Notice the considerable resources Beauvoir has made available to herself to resist the implication, early in *The Second Sex's* opening, that a generalized objectification, so long as it is shared and reversible, might be not only acceptable but also ethically salutary. How best to read the case made by Beauvoir that a number of different notions of reciprocity are called for? What is the problem to which so many concepts are made to differentially respond? The question requires both a critical and sympathetic reading, although reciprocity's multivalence has proven confusing. Perhaps the best question we can direct at this material is: what is accomplished by this multiplicity? Unlike her discussions of race and cultural groups, in discussing sex difference she does not attempt the argument that every subject discovers he or she may be other from a sexed perspective. She does not attempt to argue that men can be systematically othered by women on the basis of sex, nor that this could form an alternative ideal. Instead, she draws on other conceptual models.

CONVERSIONS OF RECIPROCITY

Just prior to writing *The Blood of Others*, Beauvoir had asked, "Hegel or Heidegger?"³³ with the question evidently arising from her stylized attribution of ideas to each philosopher. Though she had read *Phenomenology of Spirit* closely,³⁴ it is only the master-slave dialectic (interpreted in terms of a fundamentally antagonistic struggle between individuals)³⁵ that she initially seems to have gleaned from Hegel, and which is used as the epigram to *L'Invitée* (*She Came to Stay*). Her readings of Heidegger³⁶ seem to have prompted her interest in formulating what she initially takes to be a

³³ See Beauvoir, *Journal de guerre Septembre 1939-Janvier 1941* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 362.

³⁴ See Beauvoir, *Journal de guerre Septembre 1939-Janvier 1941* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 297–361.

³⁵ This is the element on which Kojève concentrated in his lectures on Hegel given from 1933–9 and published in 1947, with portions published in articles in 1939 and 1946. Commentators on Beauvoir's reading of Hegel agree on the importance of Kojève's influence, with disagreement turning on the extent to which, and how, she transformed categories derived from both, and how her relationship to Sartre should be understood in this respect. See, for example, Kimberly Hutchings, *Hegel and Feminist Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 57; Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophy and Feminism*, 86–7; and Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex* (London: Athlone, 1996), who quotes an interview she undertook with Beauvoir in Paris in December 1985. Although, Beauvoir explains, she did not attend Kojève's seminar, "I had read what Kojève had written and it interested me a great deal. Particularly interesting was what he had written about the master and slave dialectic. But I had not followed his lectures." Lundgren-Gothlin also notes that in *Force of Circumstance* Beauvoir mentions a discussion with Queneau about Kojève, but that there is no other mention of the latter in the memoirs (273, n16); see Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 34–5.

³⁶ See Chapter 1, footnote 22.

countering idea – *Mitsein*.³⁷ And in these months, this interest prompts a new idea, which she again takes to be gleaned from Hegel: some kind of reciprocity or mutual recognition. Coming neither particularly from Hegel nor from Heidegger (but attributed to both) the reciprocity connotes an implicit relationship of community, and also responsiveness to the “appeal” or “call” of the other. These two ideas, as they appear in Beauvoir’s work, aren’t specifically attributed to any philosopher (it is in her work journals that they are associated with the German philosophers).³⁸ Nor are they synthesized into a stable, newly coined notion in Beauvoir’s work. Rather, a circuit of concepts is installed, with a movement between the various notions of reciprocity, community, and recognition, differing from each other but not in a way that Beauvoir identifies or synthesizes.

Largely confining herself to *The Second Sex* and the earlier work, Nancy Bauer has offered a new interpretation of the status of reciprocity in Beauvoir’s work. Though it focuses on Beauvoir’s interrogation of the situation of woman, Bauer’s interpretation also ought to have further implications for the status of race and age in Beauvoir’s work.

Bauer isolates one of the multiple concepts of reciprocity in Beauvoir’s work that provides an alternative to the oppositional tenor of the introduction to *The Second Sex*. We have seen the diversity of reciprocities of which Beauvoir avails herself, and via one of these concepts, Beauvoir’s view is that we are, all of us, an upsurge in the world, a state of primary responsiveness and dependence on the other’s response to us. Bauer focuses on Beauvoir’s account of our original anguish – this can be understood as both an original abandonment in the world, and an original freedom from which we would seek to flee – and our turn to the other for confirmation. The resulting fragility of the other’s role is, for a subject, hard to bear. We will never have a fixed identity or solidity, because we are the result

³⁷ Which appears several times in *The Second Sex*; see, for example, USxxiii, xxv, 35, 47; UK17, 19, 67, 79; Fr1, 17, 19, 74, 88, 121, 128. See also Lundgren-Gothlin, “Reading Simone de Beauvoir with Martin Heidegger,” *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Claudia Card. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 45–65, 57–8; and Bauer, “Beauvoir’s Heideggerian Ontology,” in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir. Critical Essays*, ed. Simons (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 65–91. Bauer locates and offers a précis of five references to *Mitsein* in *The Second Sex*, along with an account, shorter than her treatment of the Hegel-Beauvoir relationship, of the significance and role of *Mitsein* for Beauvoir.

³⁸ See notes 37, 38. Some of Beauvoir’s notebooks can be consulted at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, and are being progressively published and translated into English. As of 2007 one can consult Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student: Volume 1, 1926–27 (Beauvoir Series)*, ed. Barbara Klaw, Sylvie Le Bon De Beauvoir, Margaret A. Simons, and Marybeth Timmerman (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006); and, from a later period, Beauvoir, *Journal de guerre Septembre 1939-Janvier 1941* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

of our engagements with and responses to the other (and vice versa). This fragility, like original anguish, can provoke a hunger for greater sturdiness, rigidity, or self-presence: an armor of identity. Seemingly, the other can confer this, in a particular way. Of course, I am inevitably the product of the other insofar as I am fed, amused, disgusted, or startled, when I learn the other's language; acquire his or her ideas; when I converse, interact, love, and am loved, or am shamed; and so on. But there can also be a particular, narcissistic appeal in the perception (should the perception arise) that another sees me in a gratifying way. I may subordinate the other to try to secure this perception, and I may delude myself that I coincide with this gratifying, supposed perspective. It is one thing, then, to speak with, respond to, and interact with the other, with all the risks this entails. It is another to profit unduly from the perspective of the other, particularly if this involves subordination of the other and the failure to recognize his or her freedom.³⁹

What kind of recognition do we hope for? One kind would be implicit in the caress, in care, nourishment, language, and other kinds of interaction. But a quite different kind of recognition is the aim of an aspiration that the other "see" one in a certain way so that one's freedom appeared more fixed, less evanescent, more concrete through one's efforts to see oneself through the other's putatively gratifying eyes. On Beauvoir's interpretation, we sometimes make this our aim, but it is deemed an unethical aim, for nonreciprocal recognition.

In all cases, our need and desire for response from the other renders us constitutively vulnerable subjects. On this view I do risk objectification (as needy, receptive, desirous, requesting) by calling and responding to the other. Thus, the (Hegelian derived) question of how much of "life itself" we are prepared to risk in our encounter with the other⁴⁰ is partly

³⁹ See Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism*, 207–36; discussing amongst other key passages Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* US47; UK79, FR190; US268–9, UK296, FR114–15. See also Fredrika Scarth, *The Other Within: Ethics, Politics and the Body in Simone de Beauvoir* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), for her account of the subordinating and self-serving relation to the other as childish or adolescent, versus the more exposing stance toward the other which is to be considered more mature, on Scarth's reading an ethical "coming of age," 108–9.

⁴⁰ Describing Hegel's master-slave dialectic, Beauvoir comments, "the master's privilege, he says, derives from his affirmation of Spirit as against Life through the fact that he risks his own life, but in fact the conquered slave has known this same risk, whereas woman is originally an existent who gives Life [*la Vie*] and does not risk *her* life [*sa vie*]; there has never been combat between her and the male . . . woman also aspires to [*vise*] and recognizes the values that are concretely attained by the male. He it is who opens up the future to which she also transcends [*se transcende*]. In truth women have never set up female values in opposition to male values." Beauvoir is not claiming that the relationship between man and woman is like Hegel's description of the master and slave, despite the somewhat confusing comment, "certain passages of the dialectic according to which Hegel defines the relationship of the master to the slave would apply much better to the relation of man

at work here: the risk I run is not incurred in my struggle for recognition, but in a sense “prior to that,” in my desire for exchange and response. My struggle for (fixing) recognition as freedom is instead, in a sense, the implicit attitude that we will not take the risk depicted by Beauvoir. Rather than accepting the risk of our vulnerable exchanges with others, there may be participation in a master-slave dialectic, whose risk (in a “second time” of risk) is the potential death (or annihilation); or on the Sartrean-Beauvoirian model, the risk is the objectification, or the fixing, of one of the parties. By contrast, the ideal of living with vulnerability is privileged by Beauvoir as a countering ethical ideal. It is a vulnerability associated with the willingness of both parties to affirm both themselves and the other as, in a positive sense, ambiguous – as always simultaneously object, in addition to subject for each other. In sum, Bauer’s argument is that Beauvoir, without drawing attention to the fact, introduces an extra layer in which a battle has already been lost if subjects engage in variations of a master-slave struggle attributed to Hegel and discussed by Sartre.

Yet this material arises in conjunction with a panoply of alternate concepts of reciprocity and recognition also diffused through Beauvoir’s work.⁴¹ In particular, although Bauer’s interpretation does not take into consideration Beauvoir’s later work on aging, that material offers a substantial reconfiguration of her ethics, politics, and concepts of reciprocity. Does being sexed have a privileged relationship, according to *The Second Sex*, with the subordinating and objectifying ways in which we respond to original anguish? Does being sexed have a privileged relationship with the ethically preferable alternatives imagined by Beauvoir? At times, the work does suggest this connection, with troublesome results. For example, in material that has often been considered a distinctive and innovative element of Beauvoir’s work,⁴² she depicts the potential importance of generosity, the gift, and vulnerability in the exchange between heterosexual

to woman.” She is commenting that at least the slave has encountered the question of willingness to risk life, even if the master has won that battle. By contrast, woman has not even known the question: she is, if anything, more slave than the slave – or, by that account, not yet even at the level of the slave described by Hegel (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US64–5; UK96; FR112, trans. mod).

⁴¹ As Bauer comments, “Beauvoir is struggling to appropriate intuitions she has picked up from Hegel and Sartre, and Husserl (not to mention Merleau-Ponty) from the earliest works on” (*Simone de Beauvoir*, 140).

⁴² For discussions concentrating on the significance of this material, see Debra Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997) and Scarth, *The Other Within*. For a reading that emphasizes the relationship between violence and an ethics of generosity in Beauvoir’s work, see Ann V. Murphy, “Between Generosity and Violence: Toward a Revolutionary Politics in the Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir,” in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, ed. Simons (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 262–75.

lovers, imagining the possibility that “New relations of flesh and sentiment of which we have no conception will arise between the sexes [*entre les sexes naîtront de nouvelles relations charnelles et affectives dont nous n’avons pas d’idée*].”⁴³ Demonstrating the need for these new relations, she claimed of the “curse [*malédiction*] weighing down on marriage” in “The Mother,” that “too often the individuals are joined in their weakness [*faiblesse*] rather than in their strength [*leur force*] – each asking from the other instead of finding pleasure in giving.”⁴⁴ Moreover, women have not, historically, been in a position to give, for only in the context of a range of possibilities for intersubjective relationships could generosity, as Beauvoir conceives it, be significant. Women have been deprived of its ethical significance by the historical associations between femininity and self-abnegation. If men have found it too easy to rely on women’s self-denial, they too have been deprived of the ethical significance of generosity.⁴⁵ She describes men as “eager to take and not to receive, not to exchange but to rob [*il veut prendre et non recevoir, non pas échanger mais ravir*].”⁴⁶

So, to some extent, Beauvoir begins to envisage alternative possibilities for relations between the sexes. These would require a more equal historical and contextual footing for both, and, she specifies, a reform of “women’s social and economic situation as a whole” upon which depends “the conditions under which woman’s sexual life unfolds,”⁴⁷ in order for relations of generosity to function, and to do so with an ethical significance. Thus, when Beauvoir asks how women could accomplish a “normal and happy flowering of feminine eroticism [*l’épanouissement normal et heureux de l’éroticisme féminin*],” she proposes that it would require “that in love, affection [*tendresse*], sensuality,” women could establish “a relation of reciprocity with her partner,” something which might be possible if men could combine lust with a recognition of his female partner’s freedom.⁴⁸ Notice that battle-like relations between the sexes are no longer considered an

⁴³ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US730; UK740; FrII575.

⁴⁴ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US522; UK537; FrII338.

⁴⁵ See also Beauvoir’s critical interpretation of self-denial in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. In that work self-denial is not particularly associated with either of the sexes, and her description of “enlightened, consenting gratitude,” requires that “one must be capable of maintaining face to face these two freedoms that seem to exclude each other: the other’s freedom and mine. I must simultaneously grasp myself as object and as freedom and recognize my situation as founded by the other, while asserting my being [*être*] beyond [*au-delà*] the situation. It is not a matter of paying off a debt here. There exists no currency that allows for paying the other in return. Between what he has done for me and what I will do for him, there can be no measure” (Beauvoir, “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” 90–149, 123).

⁴⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US691; UK699; FrII533.

⁴⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US402; UK422; FrII168.

⁴⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US401; UK421; FrII167.

inevitable expression of alterity, an idea that had partially arisen in the "Introduction," but rather an indication of something aberrant or failed between the sexes.⁴⁹ Thus, as she reiterates in "The Woman in Love":

authentic love [*l'amour authentique*] ought to be founded on the mutual recognition [*reconnaissance réciproque*] of two liberties; the lovers would then experience themselves [*s'éprouveraient*] both as self and as other: neither would give up transcendence, neither would be mutilated; together they would disclose [*dévoileraient*] values and aims in the world. For the one and for the other, love would be the revelation of self by the gift of self and enrichment of the world.⁵⁰

The same themes are evoked as an alternative ideal for reciprocity in *eros* in "Sexual Initiation," a chapter in which Beauvoir figures *eros* as that experience in which the ambiguity (*ambiguïté*) of our condition is most poignantly disclosed to us, here defining the ambiguity of our condition as our *simultaneous* status as subject and other, flesh (*chair*) and mind (*esprit*). Imagining the necessary transformation of the social and economic conditions of these encounters between women and men, Beauvoir imagines the possible generosity, and reciprocity, of the exchange between them with the following questionable lyricism⁵¹:

Under such conditions the lovers can enjoy a common pleasure, in the fashion suitable for each, the partners each feeling the pleasure as being his or her own but as having its source in the other. The verbs *to give* and *to receive* exchange meanings; joy is gratitude, pleasure is affection. Under a concrete and carnal form there is reciprocal [*réciproque*] recognition of the ego and of the other in the keenest awareness of the other and of the ego. Some women say they feel the masculine sex organ in them as part of their own bodies; some men say that they *are* the women they penetrate. These are evidently inexact expressions, for the dimension, the relation of the *other* still exists; but the fact is that alterity no longer has a hostile implication, and indeed this sense of the union of really separate bodies [*cette conscience de l'union des corps dans leur séparation*] is what gives its emotional appeal to the sexual act; and it is the more overwhelming as the two beings, who together in passion assert and deny their boundaries, are similar and yet unlike

⁴⁹ Again, this theme is developed at length by Scarth, but see Murphy's qualifications in "Between Generosity and Violence" concerning the role of generosity in Beauvoir's work. Murphy notes that commentators have devoted considerably less attention to Beauvoir's sympathy for revolutionary violence than her ethics of generosity, yet she notes that they are interrelated. To downplay the former theme in favor of the latter may amount to "the evasion of the issue of race and its influence on Beauvoir's political thought," 262. Moreover, "it is strange that her audience has largely ignored the manner in which generosity and violence are linked in Beauvoir's ethical writings," 263.

⁵⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US667; UK677; FrII505, trans. mod.

⁵¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US402; UK422; FrII168, trans. mod.

[*différents*]. This unlikeness [*différence*], which too often isolates them, becomes the source of enchantment when they do unite.⁵²

It can be seen that Beauvoir tends to privilege a heterosexual sexuality and relationality in her work. She construes the difference of sexual difference as heightening our vulnerability toward and uncertainty before the other, in a way she seems to consider representative of the promising risks of human existence. Sexual relations (deemed by Beauvoir fragile, generous, and giving, but most frequently associated, as an ideal, with a default heterosexuality) would be somehow emblematic of what it is like for humans to engage with the confronting difference of another. This is the most generous interpretation one could give of her privileging of heterosexual sexuality in these terms in *The Second Sex*, although evidently it relies on the erroneous association of relations between men and women as a more challenging negotiation with difference.⁵³

Yet this interpretation makes little sense of why race relations are not discussed in these terms. Might it not be said that as we live with the meanings and responsiveness of the other with respect to sex, we similarly live in a world of race differentiation: we are subject to the meanings bestowed upon us, and with which we interact, and which we also bestow? Thus, our relations with those deemed somehow of another culture or race could be considered particularly emblematic of the vulnerability and risk of all human exchange and of human existence more generally. Beauvoir could offer this argument, but she does not. Instead, we saw that in theorizing race

⁵² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US401; UK421; FrI167. Although there is evidently an almost univocal emphasis on the heterosexual erotic encounter, it should be noted that generosity is briefly reiterated as an emblem of ideal erotic exchange between women when Beauvoir discusses lesbian sexuality: "Like all human behaviour [*les conduits humaines*], homosexuality leads to make-believe, disequilibrium, failure [*échec*], lies, or, on the contrary, it becomes the source of rewarding [*fécondes*] experiences, in accordance with whether it is lived in bad faith, laziness [*paresse*], and inauthenticity [*l'inauthenticité*], or in lucidity, generosity, and freedom [*liberté*]" (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US424; UK444; FrI, trans. mod).

⁵³ Relatively sympathetic accounts of Beauvoir on *eros* include Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*, and Sara Heinämaa, "The Body as Instrument and as Expression," in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Card (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 66–86, 81–2. This means of conceptualizing difference is seen again in Beauvoir's comment: "there will always be [*demeura*] certain differences between man and woman; her eroticism, and therefore her sexual world, have a particular form [*une figure singulière*], and therefore cannot fail to arouse [*engendrer*] in her a particular sensuality, a sensitivity [*sensibilité*]. That means that her relations to her own body, to that of the male, to the child, will never be identical with those of the male with his own body . . . those who make much of 'equality in difference' could not with good grace refuse to grant me that there can be differences in equality" (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US731; UK740; FrI575–6).

she more typically imagines homogeneous identities that intermittently turn the tables on each other as objectified and objectifier. Her very insight that reciprocity is not just a matter of objectified and objectifier, of fixing and being fixed, but of shared meanings, vulnerability, fragility, risk, and communication, is not extended to the sharing of meanings for race. Thus, although Beauvoir does not draw this conclusion, gender, inexplicably, and not convincingly, becomes a mode of rescue for race. Particularly in the light of Bauer's and Scarth's interpretations with respect to forms of relations that are considered ethically problematic, and others that are privileged, we can ask how matters of race, sex, and aging attach themselves to different visions of reciprocity throughout her work. In fact, race relations are made the emblem for one kind of nonreciprocity, one kind of ethical failure in the engagement between subjects (the objectifying and objectified, the perception of race "strangeness," cultural suspicion, or hostility in the perception of difference). Revised (hetero)sexual relations are made the privileged representative, through the heuristic of *eros*, of Beauvoir's ethical alternative in terms of a model of risk, fragility, and generosity toward the other.

However, if the interconnecting and combining models of reciprocity are interpreted collectively as a problematic that takes shape in her work, an answering alternative can then be found in some of the late material taking up the problem of aging. She argues that one tends to visualize old age as the other,⁵⁴ and along the lines of *The Second Sex* she presents a wide of variety of phenomena institutionalizing the perception of the aged as not the norm; however, the argument does not take exactly the same form as her argument that femininity (and, more implicitly in her work, non-whiteness) may be considered the other. The differences prompted by aging lead her to add further diversity to her conception of the ways in which one can be other. These different forms of alterity mutually intersect, leading to a modeling of coexistence that is given several expressions in Beauvoir's texts. In addition, the later work on aging provides a venue for her to return to her reflections on ethics and politics. Some reformulations need not be confined to aging per se. Instead, aging should be considered the vehicle for Beauvoir's further considerations of identity, alterity, and coexistence, thereby establishing relations of auto-resistance between ethical and political tenors in her work.

⁵⁴ "Thinking of myself as an old person when I am twenty or forty means thinking of myself as someone else as *another* than myself [*c'est me penser autre*]" (Beauvoir, *Old Age*, trans. Patrick O'Brian [Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1977], 11).

AGING AND RECIPROCITY

To all the accounts of reciprocity Beauvoir had introduced in *The Second Sex* must finally be added her return to the concept in *La Vieillesse*, this time in reference to Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. As Beauvoir discusses it in reference to that work, reciprocity would again involve my adopting the status of being simultaneously both subject and object.⁵⁵ Take the case of myself and another agent, both engaging in some kind of action, and understanding each other as similarly engaged. In this case, I "integrate [the Other] as an object in my totalizing [*totalisateur*] project" at the same time that I "recognize his motion [*mouvement*] towards his ends," all the while that I "see myself [*je me découvre*] as an object and as an instrument of those ends."⁵⁶ "In this relationship," she elaborates, "each steals an aspect of the real from the other, thereby showing him his boundaries [*ses limites*]: an intellectual knows oneself as such when faced with the manual worker. The essential requirement of reciprocity is that on the basis of my teleological dimension [*à partir de ma dimension téléologique*] I should apprehend the other's [*je saisisse celle de l'autre*]."⁵⁷ But, Beauvoir argues, raising a point not considered by Sartre despite the radical modification seen in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, "the opposite occurs in the case of the adult-old man-adult relationship. Apart from some exceptions, the old man no longer *does* anything. He is defined by an *exis*, not by a *praxis*."⁵⁸ This is close to the definition of women's condition offered by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, and she argues that men lose, in aging (particularly when not wealthy) what distinguishes them from women (for example, access to the public sphere, financial independence, and the role as family provider).

What does this mean for the prospects of reciprocity between subjects given the proportions of individuals in any context that might not fully be defined as "doing"?

⁵⁵ Kruks suggests that reciprocity, as theorized in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, is "strikingly anticipated" by Beauvoir's earlier revisions of the concept. Yet notice that Beauvoir returns the exchange by referencing reciprocity in *La Vieillesse* to *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. When Beauvoir revises a Sartrean model, it is uncommon, as we have seen, for her to draw attention to the fact, and in *La Vieillesse* Beauvoir refers intermittently to both *Being and Nothingness* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, as if these were compatible works. Some argue that Sartre's practico-inert may be seen as the equivalent of what is termed facticity in the former work. However, the reciprocity Sartre conceptualizes in the *Critique* is wholly absent as an ideal or possibility in the former. See Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 248, trans. mod; Beauvoir, *La Vieillesse*, 235; and Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity and Society* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 200.

⁵⁶ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 243; *La Vieillesse*, 230–1.

⁵⁷ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 244 (trans. mod); *La Vieillesse*, 231.

⁵⁸ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 244; *La Vieillesse*, 231. The translator adds to the text, "a being, not a doing."

Beauvoir had never made the claim that race and culture are the domain of one kind of difference (and model for reciprocity), and sex difference the paradigm of alternative models of reciprocity. Instead, we have seen that race provides the emblem for one kind of difference in Beauvoir's work, and that sex provides the emblem for another kind of difference. Her discussions of race and cultural difference stress the inevitability of hostility, antagonism, difference, resistance, a potentially reversible exchange of objectification, and the perception of the "strangeness," or the opacity of the other. While it is in the context of her discussions of sex that the ideals of vulnerability, risk, generosity, and gift are figured – in addition to an exchange in which there cannot be a reliable calculation of what and how much is exchanged – with her late work on old age Beauvoir also discusses at length a third modality of alterity.⁵⁹ With respect to the models of inequality and reciprocity she has considered to date, this material introduces an alternative challenge posed by practically unequal relationships between the young and the old, the adult and the aged, the dependent and the nondependent. Age inequality is, she argues, intensified by class and the capitalist context,⁶⁰ particularly in cultural contexts in which those who are neither propertied nor possessed of independent wealth or respected caste have a marginal status. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir had argued that economic equality was vital to other forms of recognition and reciprocity between the sexes. Although she certainly argued that economic reform could affect the living conditions of the aged, she did not, with respect to generational age difference, envisage a model of reciprocity that could be premised from a position of equality. A different model of reciprocity, and a different comprehension of the interrelations between intergenerational subjects would be needed, one that touched also on issues of identity. Again recognition would come together with redistribution. While the role of redistribution was not greatly different in *The Second Sex* and *La Vieillesse* (though it receives more emphasis in the latter), Beauvoir would find alternative means to conceive reciprocity and the relationship of subjectivity and alterity.

⁵⁹ One of the means in which Beauvoir approaches a new formulation of reciprocity is via the implicit, countering suggestion that there is no abstractable "sex," "race," or "age." Though *La Vieillesse* has only a little to say on issues of race and cultural difference (and far more about the mutual inflections of gender and aging), the argument against the abstraction of these aspects of identity becomes most pronounced in *La Vieillesse* and arises in that work from the suggestion that the significance of age must be understood in conjunction with the significance of sex, wealth, class, health, and matters of recognition.

⁶⁰ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 16–7.

CONVERSIONS OF ALTERITY

Among alterity's several meanings in Beauvoir's work, one formulation for otherness addresses whether a young adult male will recognize himself in the marginalized other. According to her argument, a young adult male does not wish to recognize his likeness in "that woman" – neither, Beauvoir argues in *La Vieillesse*, does he wish to recognize his likeness in "that aged person."⁶¹ According to *The Second Sex*, a man should be willing to recognize his likeness in a woman because she is "a free and autonomous being [*une liberté autonome*] like every human [*comme tout être humain*]."⁶² It is partly for this reason that Beauvoir has sometimes been associated with a feminism of sameness.⁶³ She does not argue that women should be affirmed in their femininity, but rather in terms of putative universals: freedom and ambiguity.

But a different sense in which women, and all subjects, could identify in terms of universals is in being fragile, permeable, and open to alterity, perpetually vulnerable to literal transformation as one's other, an inhabitation ascribed to all existents.⁶⁴ According to the argument in *La Vieillesse*,

⁶¹ The implicit ethic here is that he should, and might well be able to do so, were it not for the depreciation of women and the aged. Does this mean that her ideal model of recognition is here modeled on the basis of "sameness" or "likeness" as an exemplary model? Beauvoir is concerned less with this question than with the reasons why the older person, or the woman, fails to be perceived as "same" or "like." More important than an ethics of seeing all humans as alike is a politics addressing equivalence, and problematizing from an ethical perspective instances of the violent rejection of any such possible perception. Beauvoir builds on this with an alternative model to likeness: the equivalence of shared vulnerability.

⁶² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, USxxxv, UK29; trans. mod; Fr131.

⁶³ Evidently, Beauvoir denounced economically, politically, and socially differential treatment of the sexes; nonetheless, see Bergoffen for a reading that reminds us of Beauvoir's wariness of one aspect of a politics of equality. Equality, argues Bergoffen, can be seen as the second myth of femininity, whereas the first deems women inferior. According to the second, "if we are taken in by the myth at this level and if we object to the position of women as inferior, we will organize our projects of liberation around the issue of equality. We will either claim that women are equal to men or insist that they be given opportunities to become men's equal. Taking this route, we miss the point of patriarchy. There is, Beauvoir insists, no neutral subject here; the norm is a man" (*The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*, 169. See also Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, USxxxiii; UK27; Fr128–9: "we must discard the vague notions of superiority, inferiority, equality, which have hitherto corrupted every discussion and start afresh." Bergoffen's interpretation is notable for having most strongly highlighted, among Beauvoir's commentators, both the importance of *eros* in Beauvoir's work, broadly defined, and also, stronger affinities with a politics of difference than are usually identified in Beauvoir's work. She even proposes the work of a French feminist of difference as Beauvoir's "unlikely ally"; see Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*, 206ff.

⁶⁴ On this see Ursula Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir: Gender and Testimony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), one of the few works on Beauvoir to have devoted concerted attention to Beauvoir's theoretical and literary writings on aging. As Tidd writes, "In the representation of ageing embodiment in these later texts . . . Beauvoir takes up her theorization of embodied existence which is first articulated in her philosophy of the 1940s. Her focus in *Une Mort très douce* and *Adieux* on

a younger person should be able to recognize him or herself in an older person because old age will happen to us all, because we share the necessity of aging, and we encompass our ongoing metamorphosis into what is often taken to be other.

That the young should, as she argued, “recognize” themselves in the aged⁶⁵ need not be conceived as a politics that values sameness of identity. It is consistent with a recognition of our equivalence as fragile, as the threshold of what may be deemed intrusion by aging time, yet is inevitable, and is mediated by the displacements of difference from within and without. Subjects who locate themselves in the field of constant aging decenter themselves, dislodging the illusion of themselves as fixed and continuous. Identifying oneself in the other is in this case not a means of reinforcing the illusions of an ego fantasizing that those around it are like it. Instead, it is a means of dislodging the illusion that there is a stable “it” for others to be “like.”

To arrive at this interpretation, Beauvoir took the position that old age did in fact exist, noting about the preparation of *La Vieillesse* that “great numbers of people, particularly old people, told me kindly or angrily but always at great length and again and again, that old age simply did not exist!”⁶⁶ She noted a tendency to “evade old age.” Americans, she claimed in another of her casual characterizations of cultural difference, “avoid all reference to great age” in much the same way as they strike “the word death out of their vocabulary.”⁶⁷ She agrees that there is no definite boundary mark, no fixed identity to aging. But rather than reject the term altogether, she preferred a politics that could affirm and revalue aging as intrinsic to human existence. Beauvoir rethinks the integrity of every subject as inhabited by this literal, perpetual metamorphosis, as a means of undoing the opposition between “normal” and “aged.” A generalized identity as “aging”

the aging body may be explained by an attempt to represent the materiality of the body without recourse to the gendered example of maternity. The ageing, illness and death of the human body is presented as an irreducible and largely democratic event which affects women and men, whatever their social and economic status,” 164.

⁶⁵ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 12. There is also an overlapping economic argument. The young also will not recognize themselves in the aged, because the aged represent lesser worth. Beauvoir argues that we must not only change our attitudes to “the aged,” but our attitudes towards human worth more generally. The argument is nicely captured by Beauvoir’s suggestion that in order for the aged to be treated as fully human, all humans would always have to have been treated as fully human. This would require a radical social transformation of attitudes and economic relations, such that we did not associate the worth of a human with their wealth, productivity, or profitability for others (for Beauvoir, effectively an inhuman way of thinking about a human) – see Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 603–4.

⁶⁶ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 7. ⁶⁷ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 7.

is reaffirmed, and reaffirmed as residing at the heart of the normal, offering one means of disturbing the marginalization and depreciation of the aged.⁶⁸

In this respect, Beauvoir's politics appear to have been notably different from her approach to sex objectification. Sometimes Beauvoir does affirm sexual difference as a value, contemplating the possibilities of *eros*, risk, gift, and exchange in utopian, reciprocal relations (which she restricts to a depiction of alternative possibilities between men and women). But never, as Toril Moi has noted, does she affirm "feminitude"⁶⁹ as a new, alternative value, neither as a means of countering the depreciation of women, nor as a means of rethinking all men and all women as inhabited by the feminine, which has been marginalized and displaced away from the norm.

Something different occurs in her writing on aging. She amplifies a generalized version of what has been ascribed to a marginalized group – the fact of aging – and argues for the reinterpretation of all humans in terms of this refigured, affirmed field.⁷⁰ She argues that the phenomenon of being

⁶⁸ Thus Scarth has interrogated Beauvoir's ethics of alterity from the perspective of another means of thinking "the other within." In addition to *eros*, she argues that maternity can usefully be so conceptualized; see *The Other Within*. True, some feminists have criticized Beauvoir's writing on maternity, but for Scarth the historically poor status of women and of mothers is an important consideration in these depictions. Though Scarth's account is particularly detailed, considering the ambiguity of the maternal experience in the context of early works such as *The Ethics of Ambiguity* through *The Second Sex*, she is not the only feminist philosopher to have theorized the significance of maternity's subject-other ambiguity from a phenomenological perspective, and one could consult Iris Marion Young, "Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation," *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 75–96. And for a discussion of pregnancy along with disease and old age as thresholds for considering the embodiment of subjective experience, see Sally Gadow, "Body and Self: A Dialectic," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 5 (1980): 172–85. While Scarth offers important suggestions for the interpretation of ambiguity in Beauvoir's work, there would be particular advantages from Beauvoir's perspective of conceiving aging as "the other within," given its apparent candidacy as the universal inhabitant. Beauvoir reconsidered much in her theoretical work, but seemingly not her commitment to the appeal of that kind of universalism. Luce Irigaray might argue that insofar as we are existent subjects, we have necessarily occupied an ambiguous relationship with a maternal body, whether or not we reproduce. By contrast, Beauvoir had a greater interest in emphasizing the universality of the alterity of aging.

⁶⁹ Moi suggests the contrast with writings on race by Senghor and Fanon. Asserting that "Beauvoir is right to question the historical and theoretical value of feminist identity politics," Moi argues that Beauvoir nevertheless "seriously underestimates the *strategic* value of a politics of difference"; see Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford, London, and Harvard: Blackwell, 1994), 212, 291n.

⁷⁰ If we compare this to Julia Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves*, for example, Kristeva interrogates the resources for challenging racism via one's capacity to understand oneself as "stranger to myself," as already housing "the stranger within." A generalized version of an othered quality – foreignness, alienness, displaced onto a racially denigrated other – is, in Kristeva's conceptual framework, relocated at the heart of the subject who otherwise disavows and displaces it: "Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are

other is displaced onto women, and non-whites. She adopts an alternative ideal in which every subject is re-identified, not just as “potentially” othered as aged, but *as* aging. In short, Beauvoir proposes as an ethical imperative that we should identify ourselves in the other more specifically than she had previously suggested.

Because the argument took the form of identifying aging as inhabiting every subject, it raised new problems in her work, since it may seem insensitive to the differences between existence as an aging forty-year-old woman and as an eighty-year-old woman. We are returned to the question of how and why the former should, according to Beauvoir’s ethics, identify herself in the latter, and not according to a model in terms of which they are alike – most obviously, to return to the expression of *The Second Sex*, as “free and autonomous being like all human beings [*comme tout être humain, une liberté autonome*].”⁷¹ Instead, what they share is exposure, vulnerability, fragility, transformation, embodied time; and it is in these terms – considered integral to freedom – that Beauvoir defines *tout être humain* in *La Vieillesse*.

One may imagine (erroneously) that one’s integrity is broken up and decentered by aging. Reconfiguring that supposition, Beauvoir’s project locates the phenomenon of aging in all existence, our shared inhabitation by the dislocation of identity in a perpetual transformation not piloted by the “I.” She agrees that the founding ego is a seductive illusion. But her work also suggests that our transforming, sick, and aging bodies have the potential to incite our knowing better. Beauvoir thematizes two kinds of constitutive vulnerability as she turns to conceptualize humans as subjects of embodied time. Discussing reciprocal vulnerability as an ethical ideal, we are conceptualized as vulnerable to being-for-others in the sense of objectification (assessment and scrutiny by the other). Beauvoir considers this a propitious experience for a subject otherwise too secure in itself, a lesson that whatever scrutiny it directs at the world, the world will direct a similar scrutiny at it. But the latter experience is not necessarily deemed to have the potential to improve the mode of the former. Moreover, racism, sexism, and ageism disavow and block this critical vulnerability. Second, vulnerability is located at the heart of all subjects considered as permeable

spared detesting him in himself. A symptom that precisely turns ‘we’ into a problem, perhaps makes it impossible, the foreigner comes in [*commence*] when the consciousness of my difference arises [*surgit*], and he disappears [*s’acheve*] when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable [*rebelles*] to bonds and communities” (*Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon Roudiez. [New York: Columbia University Press, 1994], 1).

⁷¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, USxxxv; UK29; Fr131.

to time and to the other. Life, time, and the other give to the subject its very viability (language, nutrition, the social, life itself) as they also undo it (it is dependent on language, on the environment, and nutrition that can also poison it; it is exposed to the social; it is dying).⁷²

RESISTANCES OF RECIPROCITY

Opening *The Second Sex* with one vision of reciprocity, Beauvoir had indirectly raised the possibility that an exchange of othering, objectification, perhaps even subordination, might not have posed a problem so long as it was reciprocal, in the sense of shared and exchanged. Other themes in her work questioned that possible view. When she comes, in the same work, to consider the possible reconfigurations of reciprocity in *eros*, she points out that the reciprocal vulnerability that would have to be undergone in the amorous exchanges whose ideal she imagines, would be a shared risk that involved incalculability: one could never be sure that each partner had risked, and gained, an equivalency of return. The first image suggests an exchange somehow imagined as potentially equivalent, as if one could calculate the stakes and equivalences involved in exchanging the positions of subject and other. The second image stresses risks whose equivalence could never be definitively established, and importantly so.

We saw Beauvoir's suggestion that the experience of belittling objectification can make one more likely to objectify another, as seen in her discussion of the young girls' objectification of the older, poorer woman – but even if this to be understood as an exchange, it is a frequently tragic one and has no ethical premium. Evidently, my objectification of others is neither mitigated nor equalized because I am also object. If anything the former may be made more vicious, or consolidated by the latter.

When Beauvoir discusses the intersection between gender and age alterity, the latter similarly interrupts and provides alternatives to the former articulation. I suggested that there is an implicit conversation in Beauvoir's

⁷² Recall Beauvoir's stress on the subject as ambiguously dying as a means of living in the first version of the opening to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*: "From the moment he is born, from the instant he is conceived, a man begins to die; the very movement of life is a steady progression toward the decomposition of the tomb. This ambivalence is at the heart of every individualized organism . . . man knows it. For him, this life that makes itself by unmaking itself is not just a natural process; it itself thinks itself [*elle se pense elle-même*]" (Beauvoir, "Introduction to an Ethics of Ambiguity," trans. Timmermann, in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons [Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004], 289–98, 288).

work between loss of subjective and bodily integrity deemed cataclysm, and the perpetual dislocation of subjective and bodily integrity reconsidered as normal. It is consistent with a textual movement in Beauvoir's work in which positions are established to which she is committed, but which are resisted, undermined, or answered by other positions, as when Beauvoir reiterates negative or conventional depictions that she also deplors. A dogmatism calls, and other strains respond.

Beauvoir's dogmatism could be found in all the elements declaring that a bodily degradation occurs as an interruption, often devastating, to an apparently unified body-as-norm. Such passages in her work are legion, and include her autobiographical depiction of alienation from the visual image of her own aging, and her fictional depictions of a similarly alienating and startling, inhabital loss of energy in "The Age of Discretion."⁷³ The answering refrain would be found in her every insistence that one never had a unified body-as-norm, except as an illusion whose reconsideration Beauvoir, in *La Vieillesse*, deems an ethical responsibility. This tension isn't resolved. Some of Beauvoir's most powerful writing persuades of the shock of aging, the undermining interruptions of sickness, the horror of bodily transformation, these lurid elements persuading of Beauvoir's persuasion. When she provides alternative readings, she does not settle opposing tendencies or provide resolution, suggesting that the specters of transformation, degradation, and fragmentation won't depart just because they are answerable.

THE AMBIGUITY OF AGING

Beauvoir proposes that the prospect of one's own death may be less radical for a subject than a rethinking of subjectivity in terms of one's constitution by fragmented elements whose provenance is the other, and one's exposure to constant transformation. She notes that when I imagine ceasing to exist in death, this doesn't mean that the "I" imagined as ceasing to exist is excused from a vision of identity. Hypothetical or imminent death can be a moment of greatest conviction in the identity of an "I" that will die. In this sense, death can be less frightening than aging, Beauvoir suggests: "the dead are *nothing*. This nothingness can bring about a metaphysical vertigo,

⁷³ See Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, 656, and Beauvoir, "The Age of Discretion," in *The Woman Destroyed*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (London: HarperCollins, 1984), 60.

but in a way it is comforting – it raises no problems. ‘I shall no longer exist’. In a disappearance of this kind, I retain my identity.”⁷⁴

What if one ceases thinking of the body’s asynchronous time, space, and world, of generational transformation, illness, and aging as abnormal interruptions to a normal adult body-subject in order to rethink subjectivity as their generalized domain? Then subjectivity must be rethought in ways that she considered promising, yet more unsettling.

Among Sartre’s interests was an individual’s impossible but ubiquitous aspiration to subjective permanence and fixity, the unachievable so-called “for-itself-in-itself.” Where Sartre questioned the adequacy of our relationship to time, Beauvoir interrogated the implications for human embodiment of this problematic relationship. Attached to a self-image of a fixed, unchanging⁷⁵ ego, we are all the less receptive to an alternative understanding in terms of the permanent temporal transformation that aging seems to require of us. Where Sartre is concerned with the future as a magnet for human bad faith, Beauvoir’s greater attention to embodiment transformed this into an analysis of aging and generational transformation.⁷⁶

Beauvoir reminds us that an exaggerated love of futurity likely involves forgetting that one’s existence is that of an embodied subject. This love is a twofold disavowal. In the first fold (Sartre had suggested) it is disavowal of the extent to which I am (though I am not reducible to it) my past. In the second fold (Beauvoir adds) there is probably another disavowal at work: that I am constantly aging. Many contemporary Westerners so little wish to age that lovers of the future become amnesiac on this point. This argument relies on a point to which Beauvoir was committed: that for many, aging

⁷⁴ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 11. This is one reason she is generally (with exceptions) unimpressed with the image of young and aging subjects as “as all the same,” or of a subject as “the same,” whether young or old. Imagining the same person in exchangeable bodies is akin to imagining that that “same” person has died. This position is resisted in Beauvoir’s work *Old Age*, but makes a degree of reappearance in *All Said and Done*, where (stating a view also countered in her more extensive writing on the subject of aging) she proposes, “what strikes me is the way the little girl of three lived on, grown calmer, in the child of ten, that child in the young woman of twenty, and so forward. Of course, circumstances have caused me to develop in many respects. But through all my changes I still see myself,” 38. Earlier, she points out that although a subject’s time and experiences seem sequential and accumulative, “nothing is gained without something being lost,” 22. As a subject sediments, so it is undermined. See Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, trans. Patrick O’Brian (London: André Deutsch and Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974).

⁷⁵ Beauvoir raises the question of whether our attachment to the image of a fixed unchanging body (which gives a corporeal aspect to one’s self-image as fixed ego) is or is not an image of embodiment, given that the latter is inherently changeable. It is an identification with a frozen body: a false image of a body, rather than a lived and constantly metamorphosing body.

⁷⁶ *All Said and Done* mentions Monique, the narrator of the novella “The Woman Destroyed” in the collection of the same name, as a portrayal of dependence, unhappiness, failure, error, and bad faith; see Beauvoir, “The Age of Discretion,” in *The Woman Destroyed*, 137–8.

does represent a physical transformation of a kind that is experienced as intensely dislocating.⁷⁷ Agreeing with Proust that “of all the realities [old age] is perhaps that of which we retain a purely abstract notion longest in our lives,”⁷⁸ she associates this abstraction with modes of disavowal. Despite Sartre’s focus on both the temporality and the embodiment of human existence, aging – their most obvious nexus – remains abstract and invisible in his work. One of the distinctive aspects of Beauvoir’s work is her articulation of a countering perspective rendering material and vivid the vicissitudes of embodied temporality, but this articulation is associated with the view that Westerners like her did not wish to age.⁷⁹

Beauvoir had already offered an implicit concept of sedimentation as internally dehiscent or conflicting. Many subjects – female, aged, lower class, poorly educated, disabled, those subject to racism – may experience culturally consolidated forms of marginalization as conspicuous and/or

⁷⁷ In one passage, Beauvoir is “flabbergasted at the sight of this incredible thing that serves as my face” (*Force of Circumstance*, 656). In another, the Stépha of Beauvoir’s youth appears after many years: “there stood a very little old woman leaning on a stick” (*All Said and Done*, 43). In some disjunction from the analyses of *Old Age* and the depictions of *Force of Circumstance*, Beauvoir claims in *All Said and Done* that “I do not feel that I have aged.” Considering the ten years since the end of the former autobiographical volume, she claims, “Like everybody else, I am incapable of an inner experience of it: age is one of the things that cannot be realized. . . . I am sixty-three; and this truth remains foreign to me” (*All Said and Done*, 39). The text hovers between the view that Beauvoir has no difficulty accepting old age because she has fully accepted it, or because nobody ever does accept it. If it is fundamentally incapable of being assumed, it must be seen as posing an inadmissible problem, or no problem at all.

⁷⁸ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 10, citing *Time Regained*, the final volume of *Remembrance of Things Past*, 974, which offers a depiction of aging with which she largely concurs. For Proust old age is a time in which one is dislocated. Individuals with whom one has long been acquainted might appear unrecognizable. He mentions the asynchrony between a former blonde dance-partner and “the massive white haired lady making her way through the room with elephantine tread,” 982, and the asynchrony also between his habitual phrases and conventions and the perception by others that these are now inappropriate. For Proust, this renders one a risible figure, an older man capable of referring to oneself, or acting, as still young, 973: “To ‘recognise’ someone, and, a fortiori, to learn someone’s identity after having failed to recognise him, is to predicate two contradictory things of a single subject, it is to admit that what was here, the person whom one remembers, no longer exists, and also that what is now here is a person whom one did not know to exist; and to do that we have to apprehend a mystery almost as disturbing as death,” 982 (Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin, and Andreas Mayor, vol. 1 [New York: Random House, 1981]).

⁷⁹ Beauvoir argues in *La Vieillesse* that this is a specifically Western aversion. Adding the qualification that dossiers provided by the Laboratoire d’anthropologie sociale are a main source of her comments in the chapter on ethnological data, and that her remarks should be treated cautiously, she refers to non-Western cultures in which old age is glorified, or associated with “powerful magicians, discoverers, healers,” 51, while arguing that reverence is only extended to some (shamans and patriarchs, for example, but not those suffering from conditions like dementia, 59). More extensive exceptions are to be found only where, in her view, it is to the economic or social benefit of the community to have made such exceptions, 66–9. She stresses also that “old age does not have the same meaning nor the same consequences for men and for women,” 95.

invisible, sexualized and/or desexualized, degraded, devalued, and abjected yet also mythologized or romanticized. One's modes of being for others will be especially inflected by these contradictory modes of subordination and their anticipation. But because a subject is simultaneously gendered, classed, raced, sexualized, and of a certain wealth, education, embodiment, and age, different and conflicting anticipations also intersect each other, rarely harmoniously. A young girl can be mediated by an anticipation of being uncomfortably sexualized while also anticipating her own capacity to ridicule, in terms of class, or race. One is a composite of intersecting, non-consistent, concurrent but noncoinciding anticipations *as* raced, gendered, sexualized, classed, moneyed, educated, cultured, aged. This condition gave a different sense to reciprocity.

Moreover, Beauvoir had begun *The Second Sex* with the possible implication that objectification and subordination of a suspect other became most problematic when these positions are not reciprocally exchanged. Yet it quickly became clear how little promise she saw in the point that although I might be othered sexually, someone else is no less my other in terms of race, class, or age. What then of Beauvoir's view that old age is the other? Someone may well fear becoming what she or he associates with femininity or whiteness. But the person is not threatened by the literal prospect that she or he could transform into the other race, or the other sex, against her or his will. Beauvoir was struck by the difference of age in this respect. Thinking of the normal subject as an aging body subject is the means she suggests for reconceptualizing and affirming the subject in terms of vulnerability and a constant inhabitation by what is also figured as the intruder.

Even more than sexual difference, and certainly more than race, aging was, in this respect, Beauvoir's conceptual touchstone. The lessons of sex and race according to her depiction of them concern a binary divide that could not be crossed by the shocked subject who acquires them. The racist and sexist is threatened in many ways by race and sex, but need not be threatened by the literal prospect that he or she will forcibly be transformed into the other race, or the other sex. The othering, and the otherness of age is different. Of all the forms of othering discussed by Beauvoir, aging represents a form of depreciation and marginalization in which the privileged subject is unable to secure itself from the certainty that it must become that other she or he dehumanizes, depreciates, and marginalizes. Emphasizing the aging embodiment of every subject was another means for Beauvoir to reconceptualize and affirm one's vulnerability.

This was, then, both a conversion of alterity, and a conversion of reciprocity. There was no other equivalent for Beauvoir's vision of every

individual so literally becoming (as she saw it) his or her other. She had, in *The Second Sex*, raised the prospect of men and women who deluded themselves in thinking they engaged primarily with each other. Instead, she argued, one's engagement was typically with oneself, because one had projected onto the other those aspects of oneself one denigrated. In *La Vieillesse*, Beauvoir reprised this account, arguing that individuals tended to project onto aged others an aging in themselves that was largely disavowed. The difference, however, in this formulation of alterity was the certainty that these disavowing subjects would become the other they disavowed. This conception of alterity added to, rather than undermining or contesting, the account Beauvoir's work had implicitly presented: that to be sedimented in terms of a valued or devalued identity was also to be desedimented by conflicting variations on center and marginality (through one's concurrent existence as sexed, aged, raced, classed, disabled or able-bodied, healthy or chronically ill, and so on), and the anticipations and retrospections in these respects that concurrently contested each other. As Beauvoir converted her conceptions of the manifold ways we are inhabited by alterity, the multiple conceptions of reciprocity in her work converted each other.

Discussing racism, sexism, and ageism, Beauvoir depicts white, adult males who distance themselves from femininity, from vulnerability to the passage of time, and from vulnerability to race oppression. Beauvoir is not more sympathetic with the narcissistic supposition that the other is the same as oneself. A Beauvoirian ethics would not favor ignoring the differences – between, for example, the lived embodiment of an able-bodied adult woman and that of an older woman experiencing stigma, cliché, or indifference with regard to her corporeality and its possibilities. Instead, Beauvoir imagines the refiguring of oneself as mediated by, or home to, what one would distance from oneself. An affirmation of being inhabited by alterity could be seen as a response to early philosophical works such as *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. There she had asked why and how the subject responds to the other's appeal, and interrogated the conditions of that responsiveness. With respect to the importance of aging, Beauvoir argues that we are inhabited by an alterity at issue in the quality of one's responsiveness to the other. Her view seems to be that this calls for an affirmative ethics which, allowing for the reconfiguration of one's relation to alterity – through which there might be a going beyond the more violent modes of disavowal – might, hypothetically, decenter self-serving self-identification.

Still, how optimistic should one be about this suggestion? More generally, how much optimism does Beauvoir's work allow with respect to

any formulation that lays out likely directions for transformation on the strength of its resources? With exceptions, one of the most consistent aspects of the proliferating recent commentary about Beauvoir is the positive reception to her ethics of generosity. In this context, the question of the futures anticipated by Beauvoir has sometimes arisen.

Having discussed the many theoretical elements on which Beauvoir drew, as she engaged with such concepts as ambiguity, bad faith, reciprocity, and repetition, a further direction would be to place Beauvoir's work in the context of a number of concepts of generosity and the gift circulating during the period, and later in the twentieth century.⁸⁰ This project need not only take the form of asking to what theories of the gift she is indebted, or with which concepts and theorists she most literally engaged. One can ask how her work contributed, or had the potential to contribute, to a number of theoretical conceptualizations of the gift. Her work would also open up in new directions as one considered alternative formulations on this theme.⁸¹ With respect to the gift, questions could include the relationship between its calculability and incalculability, its disavowal of and possible appeal to debt benefit or at least recognition, the relationship between its reciprocity and its lack of reciprocity, and the idea of a gift's "impossibility" (whereby the "purest" gift would be, as has been argued, unidentifiable – or imperceptible – *as a gift*).⁸² Additionally, one could inquire into the prior

⁸⁰ See, for example, Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le don* (1925); and Lévi-Strauss's discussions of exchange in *Elementary Structures on Kinship* (read in manuscript form by Beauvoir in preparing *The Second Sex* and referenced in that work; she references Lévi-Strauss's work (and Mauss's) again in *La Vieillesse*). See also Marcel Fournier, *Marcel Mauss: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 423, who cites Lévi-Strauss's letter to Mauss of October 1941 discussing his debt to the *Essai sur le don*; Heidegger on the *es gibt*, the gift; and resistance to the Maussian reading of the gift in Georges Bataille's *Inner Experience*. (Beauvoir mentions the work in *Force of Circumstance*, in conjunction with the question she confronted around the period of *L'invité! She Came to Stay* of how best to formulate the impossibility of plenitude.)

⁸¹ For example, Murphy opens a conversation between Beauvoir's "generosity," Mauss's essay on the gift, Derrida's reading of Mauss (producing the argument that the condition of possibility of the gift is the condition of its own impossibility), and the critical reading of later feminist philosophers such as Irigaray of the role of women in phenomena and concepts of exchange (see, for example, Irigaray's essay on Lévi-Strauss and the exchange of women in *Speculum of the Other Woman*). Again, in Murphy's case, the reflection on such a conversation leads her to be somewhat more circumspect about the term in Beauvoir's work, and, as noted above, particularly to note the links between violence and generosity (see Murphy, "Between Generosity and Violence"). The conversation brings Murphy to an emphasis on the paradoxical nature of ethics for Beauvoir (and, she adds, for Sartre, 268); leads her to note the criticisms both thinkers made of political strategies grounded in generosity; and thus fosters her interest in the distinction between generosity's ethical and political status in Beauvoir's work.

⁸² Here, two resources would be, most obviously, Derrida's late writing on the gift, and Rebecca Comay, "Gifts Without Presents: Economies of 'Experience' in Bataille and Heidegger," *Yale French Studies* 78 (On Bataille [1990]), 66–89, 66.

conditions of the gift in Beauvoir's discussion of *eros*. Such prior conditions might be ontological, or involve a preemptive relationality with others, or with alterity, incompleteness or indebtedness. Pursuing the Beauvoirian thematics of generosity and the gift would be a means of interpreting further the shifting and alternative positions with respect to some of her key terms: ethics, ambiguity, resistance, bad faith, ethics, reciprocity.

Commentary over the last thirty years has made clear just how many methodological possibilities there are for the interpretation of Beauvoir's writing. Some consider that one understands Beauvoir best by distilling certain key thoughts; or that Beauvoir's philosophy clarified progressively through her career, as she discarded earlier formulations; or that aspects of her earlier ethics are to be preferred over her later work.⁸³ Many consider that it serves Beauvoir, and perhaps any author best, to locate his or her most coherent and resolved reflection. Yet we augment the number of formulations, innovations, and contributions available in Beauvoir's writing, and the diversity of angles from which her work continues to be engaged, by augmenting the diversity of methodologies for its interpretation. This is not to say that Beauvoir's writing requires more ingenious methods than the work of her peers. To the contrary, the ongoing life and complex reinheritances of many historical philosophers can be seen in the diversity of approaches to their interpretation and in the interest of contemporary readers in debating these. Beauvoir is not a "special case" requiring unusual methods – rather, something is amiss if her work is exempted from the

⁸³ For example, adding to Kruks's discussion of the distinction between ontological freedom and practical or effective freedom, or power, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Kristana Arp has suggested that Beauvoir also introduces a third concept of freedom: moral freedom. We do not always achieve moral freedom, so unlike ontological freedom, it is not definable as a freedom we always possess. She argues it nonetheless is vital to a Beauvoirian concept of moral freedom that we consciously affirm ontological freedom (this would be the idea of willing one's freedom). Moreover, moral freedom supplements concepts such as bad faith, adding the obligation to enhance the practical freedom of others, and so their possibilities for moral freedom: "forgoing self-deception is not sufficient by itself to attain moral freedom. . . . Beauvoir set up an additional requirement that must be fulfilled: one must act to defend and develop the moral freedom of oneself and others. The actions of the authentic torturer obviously fail to meet this standard." See Arp, *The Bonds of Freedom: Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Ethics* (Chicago and La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 2001), 98, 2–3. Arp argues that while Beauvoir thereby solved, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, a number of problems that existentialist ontology had posed for ethics, *The Second Sex* is considerably less engaged in these distinctions between freedoms, and regrettably so. Instead, Beauvoir concentrates on the distinction between immanence and transcendence, "which cuts across her earlier distinction between ontological and moral freedom and eventually comes to eclipse it," with various resulting problems. One example of *The Second Sex's* offering weaker conceptual resources, in this respect, than those offered by *Ethics of Ambiguity*, is that *The Second Sex's* distinction between transcendence and immanence "cannot account for why the oppression of women is morally wrong" (138, 143, and see 142 for her debate with Kruks on the status of ontological freedom in *Ethics of Ambiguity*).

diversity of reading methodologies that have been brought to many of her peers.

Among the many possibilities, then, for multiplying the available methodologies is to ask how Beauvoir's work enters into tacit dialogue with itself, how certain of her own proposals resist others.⁸⁴ I have also

⁸⁴ This could evidently be formulated using different terminologies – in his *Simone de Beauvoir philosophe*, Michel Kail proposes “elle n’est pas toujours fidèle à son propre enseignement” (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006), 142. Irrespective of the terminology preferred, the aim would be to maximize the extent to which one is able to productively dislodge multiple strains and tendencies in Beauvoir's work. One should note, however, arguments that the interest in Beauvoir's contradictions is overblown, and/or also distorted by the poor translations of Beauvoir's work. Problems relating to the faulty and partial translation were first discussed by Simons in “The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir: Guess What's Missing from *The Second Sex*,” in *Women's Studies International Forum* 6.5 (1983): 559–64. Toril Moi offers a detailed treatment in “While We Wait: The English Translation of *The Second Sex*,” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27.4 (2002): 1–26, in which she includes among the results a suppression of Beauvoir's engagement with Hegel; the loss of references to ontology, alienation, and authenticity; the translation of *sujet* as self or ego; and a misleading rendition of Beauvoir's account of female embodiment, and of maternity. The issue has been of particularly pressing concern for commentators establishing the importance of Beauvoir's relationship and contribution to the German phenomenological tradition. Beauvoir's use of German terms (such as the five, according to Bauer, or seven, according to Lundgren-Gothlin, references to *Mitsein* in *The Second Sex*; see Bauer, “Beauvoir's Heideggerian Ontology,” 91) and French translations of German philosophical terms (such as Henry Corbin's *la réalité humaine* for *Dasein*) were omitted or inconsistently translated. Moi decries distorted interpretations of Beauvoir by a number of feminist commentators referring to the English translation of *The Second Sex*, in which there are inversions of meaning, word and phrase cuts, section cuts, and some rewritten phrases. Similarly noting the loss in translation of the specific German phenomenological terminology used by Beauvoir, Heinämaa and Bauer's discussion of Beauvoir's place in the phenomenological tradition has also overlapped with the expression by each of their wariness of interpretations highlighting inconsistencies in Beauvoir's work. Thus Heinämaa writes, “The terms *other* and *otherness* are capitalized when used in Levinas' absolute sense, which excludes reciprocity. It is remarkable that critics do not question the basis of this interpretation even when it leads them to state that Beauvoir was guilty of simple contradictions” (“Simone de Beauvoir's Phenomenology of Sexual Difference,” in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir. Critical Essays*, ed. Simons (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 20–41, 38; and see Bauer, “Must We Read Simone de Beauvoir?” in *The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Emily Grosholz (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2006), 115–36, 131. Bauer judges as “critique” (presumably in the sense of hostile criticism) a group of differing views about, and approaches to, Beauvoir's contradictions, or at least, she takes all these readings to be accusatory in spirit; and worse, associates them with a curiously identified group, the “critics of the current revival of interest in Beauvoir in philosophical circles,” 131. Consider the plausibility of a number of different interpretations of Beauvoir, not all of which can coincide: let us say, the understandings of reciprocity, *Mitsein*, *eros*, freedom, embodiment, and ethics, and the accounts offered of respective debts to Hegel, Marx, Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, and Heidegger, to be found in Heinämaa, Bergoffen, Arp, Krucks, and Lundgren-Gothlin. One would be closing down a good deal of interpretative possibility arguably left open by Beauvoir if one were overly forced to pit the disagreements between these readings against each other. An alternative methodology could be developed to bear witness maximally to the presence of juggling strains, tenors, and tendencies without hostility. Though not, I trust, identified as a hostile feminist critic, Arp comments of Beauvoir's work and the modifications partly relating, she considers, to Beauvoir's ongoing conceptual revisions: “One can locate various tensions, even inconsistencies, in it, that she never directly faced, perhaps because she never fit her philosophical ideas directly into a system.

suggested that an implicit dialogue be considered between Beauvoir and her peers. The possibility of such dialogue has been affirmed by some of her readers, insofar as she is already considered to have offered tacit critique (even where she does so with the apparent affect of enthusiasm, respect, or neutral citation or reiteration) by drawing unexpectedly on her peers to articulate lived femininity. These interpretations can only be enriched if we continue the inquiry. We can think further about how some of Beauvoir's peers offer the resources to resist certain of her interventions.⁸⁵ I proposed, as two examples, her encounter with Maurice Blanchot on ambiguity, and her intersection with thinkers on race particularly given her comparisons between the different formations of race and sex subordination. Again, such speculations, particularly if one includes "virtual" encounters, could lead in many directions. There is considerable room to speculate further on the directions along which one would be led by the debates in which Beauvoir engaged – directly, contextually, tacitly, virtually, and sometimes by telling omission. Beauvoir's appeal in *The Second Sex*, and in earlier work, to generosity, and to the gift, offers one such indication.

If Beauvoir's image of the gift between proud, clear-sighted, and modest lovers remains overly calculated, this is not the only resource in her work for thinking the gift. Even just relying on overt comments, Beauvoir also makes reference to the radical ambiguity of the gift's reciprocity, the

Instead of being put off by this loose-ended quality of Beauvoir's writing, I have found myself drawn in by it . . ." (*The Bonds of Freedom*, 148). It is conceivable that one could further pursue the phenomenologically emphasized readings of Bauer, Heinämaa, and others, investigating further the relations between these, while continuing to wrestle with the translation issues discussed by Moi and others, and adopt Arp's, or a similar perspective.

⁸⁵ One such route opens up in Heinämaa's "Beauvoir's Phenomenology of Sexual Difference" (though it is not pursued in this particular essay). Heinämaa presents Levinas's discussion of femininity as arising from his response to Husserl; thus the femininity of the other becomes for Levinas one means of perceiving the other *otherwise* than as alter-ego, 32. In the introduction to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir attacks, in a line, Levinas's masculine point of view on women as disregarding reciprocity between the sexes. Heinämaa continues: "Here she seems to misinterpret at least part of Levinas' claim. For her, Levinas denies feminine subjectivity and reduces the feminine other to the status of object and matter. But Levinas' statement can be understood in the opposite way; instead of compromising the difference between two sexual subjects, it exaggerates the difference," 33–4. To be sure, we imagine Beauvoir similarly unimpressed with the vision of the feminine as "radically and forever unknowable," 34. As it is not the primary concern of her article, this tacit conversation between the two philosophers does not continue further in Heinämaa's hands, yet one is intrigued to envisage its further development, beyond what Beauvoir actually said of Levinas (and the latter's responding silence). The extensive feminist interpretations of Levinas indicate at least some of the lines along which a dialogue between the two could have continued, but this does not mean that the virtual conversation on alterity and reciprocity could not be interestingly difficult for both of the imagined participants, rather than Levinas alone. For another article exploring this possible conversation, see Stella Sandford, "Writing as a Man: Levinas and the Phenomenology of Eros," *Radical Philosophy* 87 (January/February, 1998): 6–17.

incalculability of that reciprocity, and of exchange. To the extent that Beauvoir's work touches on themes of incalculability, excess, *jouissance*, uncertainty, and (to return to the much-used term), risk, the unpredictability of encounters for which this kind of *eros* is supposed to be emblematic (particularly the predictability of the outcome of the encounters – for example, political, subjective, or social consequences) is also being recognized, tacitly or otherwise.

Thus, the question arose concerning how optimistically one could associate a subject's auto-resistant alterity, a related ethics, and the ideal of subjects who eventually become less appropriative with respect to each other. This difficult connection has been developed in terms of *eros*,⁸⁶ and I have considered it here in terms of aging. Beauvoir certainly considers that we evade old age, thereby seeking to evade the "other within."⁸⁷ Hoping to propose alternatives, Beauvoir does declare that we should recognize ourselves "in this old man or in that old woman."⁸⁸ There surely

⁸⁶ A very affirmative reading of the ethics of *eros* is to be found in Bergoffen's *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*. Most recently, three strategies in Scarth's *The Other Within* include the positive interpretation given to Beauvoir's material on generosity and risk; the creative expansion of that material to include other relationships beyond *eros* defined narrowly (Scarth's example is the parent-child relationship); and third, the association between what she interprets as a reconciled or more mature relationship to incompleteness and the interiority of alterity and a less subordinating relation to the other. The interpretation gleans from early work such as "Pyrrhus and Cineas" and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* the idea that, in Scarth's words, "we must assume this ambiguity in a 'conversion' that moves us beyond oppressive and dominating relations with others and allows for the possibility of generosity as we take on the real risks of human freedom," 8. While a justifiable interpretation, there is room to interrogate the idea of a "beyond," or images of a settled reconciliation with ambiguity. In a different reading, this Beauvoirian tenor is also mentioned by Bauer, among others: "Beauvoir, on my reading of *The Second Sex*, believes that the overcoming of our present condition will require coming to terms with our ambiguity. The task is to accept oneself and others as simultaneously both subjects and objects" ("Beauvoir's Heideggerian Ontology," 86). The question arises of how we should best visualize these references to acceptance, or coming to terms, or indeed overcoming. How can we do justice to the special kind of reconciliation in question – for example, one that could never be completed, and ought not sound like a state that could be completed, or, in that sense, like a realizable accomplishment? Such concerns are also raised by Oliver Davis in response to Ryan Song. In response to Song, for whom Beauvoir's view is that aging "should be graciously accepted as an expected and proper part of existence," Stone stresses *La Vieillesse*'s view that "acceptance is not only impossible but the very desire for it is a form of denial. Old age is scandalous for Beauvoir in *La Vieillesse*, the site of irresolvable contradictions and not something that could ever be 'accepted.'" Oliver Davis, *Age Rage and Going Gently: Stories of the Senescent Subject in Twentieth-Century French Writing* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), 47, citing Ryan Song, "Comparative Figures of Ageing in the Memoirs of Beauvoir and Colette, in *Corporeal Practices. (Re)figuring the Body in French Studies*, ed. Julia Prest and Hannah Thompson (Oxford: Lang, 2000), 79–89.

⁸⁷ I refer, of course, to Scarth's phrase, and note her proposal that closer attention to Beauvoir's work on aging would produce an interpretation parallel to that offered in *The Other Within*: "Beauvoir's writings on illness and the aging body emphasize the ways in which these experiences make us aware of the ambiguity of our condition. In that sense, her depictions of illness and the aging body present some parallels with her account of the possibilities of the erotic," 135; see also 44, 167.

⁸⁸ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 12.

are implications that a better reconciliation with alterity might be possible, and also that such a reconciliation might be associable with an improved politics, for example, a less cruel distribution of resources⁸⁹:

We must stop cheating: the meaning of our life is in question in the future that is waiting for us. If we do not know what we are going to be, we cannot know who we are: let us recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman. This is necessary if we are to take upon ourselves our human condition in its totality. As a result [*du coup*] we will no longer acquiesce with indifference in the misery of the last age; we will feel concerned, as indeed we are. [*Cessons de tricher; le sens de notre vie est en question dans l'avenir qui nous attend; nous ne savons pas qui nous sommes, si nous ignorons qui nous serons: ce vieil homme, cette vieille femme, reconnaissons-nous en eux. Il le faut si nous voulons assumer dans sa totalité notre condition humaine. Du coup, nous n'accepterons plus avec indifférence le malheur du dernier âge, nous nous sentirons concernés: nous le sommes.*]⁹⁰

Beauvoir's least satisfactory suggestion would be that humans could possibly take on the entirety of the human state [*si nous voulons assumer dans sa totalité notre condition humaine*]; that this could be done [*du coup*]; and that the consequences could be described in terms of calculable outcomes [*nous n'accepterons plus avec indifférence le malheur du dernier âge*], such as the end of one's acquiescence in the deprivation of others, the end of indifference, the outcome of knowing who we are and who we will be [*nous ne savons pas qui nous sommes, si nous ignorons qui nous serons*]. Even leaving aside the conditions for better social and interpersonal responsibility, does this passage, and its conditional but promising "ifs," mean to suggest that we could know who we are, let alone who we will be?

There are evidently many elements in Beauvoir's work holding out against such an implication. The more satisfying versions involve the more ambiguous claims.⁹¹ On some points – those where ambiguity and

⁸⁹ Elements of *La Vieillesse* intimate this suggestion, particularly the association between the (ethically) poor relation to alterity, the (political) preoccupation with rates of human productivity, and the sometimes brutal (institutionalized) economic and political policies applying to seniors (*Old Age*, 266–81, 284–93, 602–3).

⁹⁰ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 12; *La Vieillesse*, 11–2, trans. mod.

⁹¹ It might be said that we could nonetheless know ourselves *as* the kind of entities that cannot know themselves. We must be occluded from ourselves to some extent on Beauvoir's view (for example, to the extent that our meanings are conferred by the future, by the other, and are constantly changing). The value of honesty *about* our ambiguous state has been emphasized by commentators (see, for her discussion of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in this context, Arp, *Bonds of Freedom*, 149). But one challenge is to capture the paradoxes concerning the possibilities of honesty in which Beauvoir was, sometimes, interested. Perhaps one could offer formulations about being honest about the impossibility of honesty, or come to "know ourselves" as best as is possible for beings who by definition cannot know themselves. If converted only into formulations associable with ideas of "coming to terms," "going beyond," or "reconciliation," something is lost, and the tenors of loving tension, and the "riskier" sense of risk, should be retained. Not every commentator has

contradiction might be most called for – Beauvoir could be best served by a presentation of as many of the complex and inconsistent lines of thought in her work as possible. The incalculability of consequences and the complexity of the gift are two such instances.

Not every tenor in Beauvoir's work favors the image of a "possible" reconciliation, maturity, and the movement "beyond." In [Chapter 1](#), I suggested alternative ways of thinking about conversion, and one could do the same with reconciliation, maturity, the future, and possibility itself. In some of her work, Beauvoir expresses interest in the fact that although one wills the future, the future, like the other, is also not something one can calculate; and, as has been noted, she sometimes gives the notion of risk fairly radical connotations. Risk means a genuinely incalculable outcome, not a reliably positive outcome. To return to the theme of literature taken up in [Chapter 1](#), we saw Beauvoir early on thinking again about the lessons, so to speak, to be learned from Kafka and Blanchot:

One of the meanings of the *Trial* described by Kafka is that no verdict can ever come to a conclusion [*aucun verdict ne vient jamais clore*]. We live in a state of indefinite procrastination [*atermolement indéfini*]. This is also the meaning of what Blanchot says in *Aminadab*: the most important thing is not to lose but one never wins. We must assume our actions in uncertainty and risk, and that is precisely the essence of freedom. Freedom is not decided with a view to a salvation [*salut*] that would be granted in advance. It signs no pact with the future.⁹²

Even Beauvoir's partial conversions of her ethics toward a politics, as when she comes close, in *La Vieillesse*, to claiming that if we identify better with aging, we will effectuate better social policy, are also resisted. Her ending concludes with a moment of resisting calculability with respect to what is required for political transformation, and transformation more generally. The resistance places the moments of ethical-political conversion one more time under conversion. Beauvoir, who has suggested connections between a more ethical relationship to aged alterity, and the hope of a greatly improved social policy, proposes that "we cannot satisfy ourselves with calling for a more generous 'old-age policy,' higher pensions, decent housing and organized leisure." Nor, she continues, would it be sufficient just to reconsider the oppressive premium placed by society on productivity and so on productive individuals. For, "It is the whole system that is at issue

found the elements in Beauvoir's work articulating risk particularly promising, but for those who have, living with "risk" might require a different metaphors than that of reconciliation with its necessity.

⁹² Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cineas," 139.

and our claim cannot be otherwise than radical – change life itself. [*C'est tout le système qui est en jeu, et la revendication ne peut être que radicale: changer la vie.*]⁹³

With this need to change life, and to change what “life” is for us, an appeal is made by the closing word to a conceptual openness. This calls into question the intermittent (though not sustained) rhetoric within the same work according to which it is also suggested that predictable and calculable outcomes could appropriately be associated with recommended changes, both political and ethical. The need for a radical change of life – one that might include a radical change of concepts of life and its relation, for example, to reproduction, repetition, death, time and value – is something else again. Any such program would be closer to the kind of freedom Beauvoir suggested could sign no pact with its future.

⁹³ Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 604. The phrase is also mentioned in Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Methuen, 1967), 138. On this, see again Oliver Davis, who offers a helpful reminder of the slogan's resonance, although this is a reminder leading, in his view, to a more limited interpretation of the phrase's possible scope for Beauvoir. “Changer la vie” is, Stone recounts, “a quotation from Rimbaud which subsequently became a barricade slogan during Mai '68. Beauvoir's Conclusion is a call for the complete reorganization of society along Marxist lines as the only way of changing the situation of older people in society, some two years after the events of 1968,” Davis, *Age Rage and Going Gently*, 40.

Conclusion

Just as much as Beauvoir converted the resources of her philosophical context, her own concepts converted each other as she progressively considered the relationship between alterity and race, sex and aging. The *Ethics of Ambiguity* provided several concepts of ambiguity. As she drew on the resources of her philosophical context, however, ambiguity also underwent conversion and contestation. Differentiations in its meaning embodied resistance between variations she proposed of associated concepts such as bad faith, authenticity, and ethics.

Beauvoir referred to, and also converted, the role of sexuality in the work of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. She offered alternatives to the master-slave dominated Sartrean depictions of sex, and formulated an ethical dimension not articulated by Merleau-Ponty. But *eros* had limitations as a threshold of ambiguity privileged by Beauvoir. Further resources in her work resisted and nuanced the conceptual dominance of *eros* in the exploration of an ethics of reciprocal vulnerability. As her equally innovative focus on the ambiguity of age intersected with the earlier theorization of the ambiguity of sexuality, Beauvoir's conversions extended most satisfyingly to an articulation of the ambiguity of an embodied temporality as aging.

The Second Sex associated sexuality with the risks and the hope of an ethics of generosity, a positive prospect for simultaneous states of being as subject and object, for and with another. Asking what made *eros* ambiguous, Beauvoir also asked under what circumstances the ambiguity of *eros* was ethical? The preoccupation with ethics continued throughout her work. Describing lower-class, working women's repetitive work, she also asked under what transformed circumstances – both individual and social – a worker in the factory or in the home might bring ethical meaning to repetitive work. Aging gained her attention as a revised means of describing every individual as ambiguous, as subjects living embodied time. What, she asked, were the ethical and political implications? Beauvoir appealed to the ethical ideal of a willing, affirmative, ambiguous, identification with

the aging other (an identification which, I have suggested, has the potential to disrupt, rather than presuppose, the identity of the identifying subject). One role for related political programs would connect this ethical ideal to a social commitment to the fair redistribution of resources between generations. For Beauvoir, a transformation of our perceptions of value, and of the human was also vital – social change sufficiently radical that it would amount to the transformation of life.

Ostensibly, her work asked what the necessary social and economic conditions were for forms of reciprocal “recognition” and also for the material experiences such recognition might amount to: less alienating experiences of sex, aging, friendship, love and family constellations, time, space, work, and creativity. Yet no life could be free of various degrees and forms of alienation. Beauvoir’s work also interrogates, tacitly perhaps, the difference between inevitable alienation and the specific alienations that arise for many from the sedimentation of lived power relations.

The complex resources in Beauvoir’s writing can be foregrounded by an interpretation highlighting the differentiations between her concepts of ethics, ambiguity, conversion, and repetition, and I have preferred such a reading to an interpretation that downplays these differentiations. Moreover, Beauvoir’s conversions of the intellectual resources on which she drew evidently left further possibilities untapped. Beauvoir articulated an ethics of ambiguity, and appropriately, she did so *with* ambiguity: in the form of the productively unsettled relationships between her major texts, between her major concepts, and unresolved, ongoing modifications of the latter. In addition, it can be argued that her work enfolded the excluded possibility of an affirmative ambiguity of ethics.

Despite the availability of more nuanced broachings of ambiguity in the work of writers as diverse as Merleau-Ponty, Blanchot, and Bataille,¹ Beauvoir’s particular analyses of sex, gender, and age were unimaginable in the context of these contemporaries. Nonetheless, to read Beauvoir in the context of an interlocutor such as Blanchot confronts her with questions she

¹ An interrogation of the virtual dialogue between Bataille and Beauvoir would be possible along lines similar to those I have proposed, in the Introduction and Chapter 1, for Blanchot. For example, see Beauvoir’s comment in *Force of Circumstance/La force des choses*: “‘How can one can consent [*consentir*] to not being all [*à n’être pas tout*]?’ Georges Bataille asks in *L’Expérience Intérieure*. The phrase had struck me because that had been Françoise’s devouring hope in *She Came To Stay*: she had wanted to be everything. I regretted not having shown this illusion and its collapse in a clearer light, and decided to rework that theme” (Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard [New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1964], 62). For her exploration of Beauvoir in conjunction with Bataille, see Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

also neglected. Beauvoir's literature performs an avoidance of ambiguity (that is to say, an avoidance of the inevitable ambiguity of ethics) that tacitly puts itself into question. Further, a case can also be made that the challenge to ethics by ambiguity is not restricted to literature. A problem unformulated by Beauvoir's work, and exceeding its boundaries, nevertheless arises within it. What might it have meant for Beauvoir to have broached the ambiguity of ethics (in addition to the ethics of ambiguity) when it came to the hopes and ideals infusing *The Second Sex* and *La Vieillesse*?

Beauvoir's work thus confronts us with a question she never posed – can the Beauvoirian ethics of ambiguity only take place under the conditions of a suspension of the ambiguity of ethics? Beauvoir considered eros, becoming woman, and the becoming of aging the very emblems of ambiguity, model exemplars. Yet, as they were converted to the realm of ethics, they were also quarantined from the ambiguity of ethics. One can ask whether this quarantine served Beauvoir's projects best. The question was left unexplored by her overt conclusions. But Beauvoir's work, and particularly the rich, densely impacted *The Second Sex* and *La Vieillesse* can be revisited so as to explore the different interpretations to which they could open through the lens of the ambiguity of ethics.

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